# Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

AUGUST 1955

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THE FLAT-EYED MONSTER
By WILLIAM TENN

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AUGUST, 1955 VOL. 10, NO. 5

# Galaxy

## SCIENCE FICTION

**ALL ORIGINAL STORIES • NO REPRINTS!**

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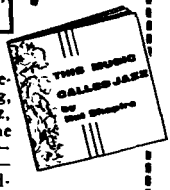


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# TWO UPPER LIPS

NOW THAT polio seems to be conquered for good, the next goal of coordinated research obviously should be mental illness, for psychiatric beds outnumber all others combined. I'm for it, of course, but my fear is that the attack is likely to be almost exclusively physiological.

Certainly this is needed in cases of organic damage or malfunction. But these account for only a small part of the trouble. By far the greater number are emotionally maimed . . . the result of a disastrous paradoxical heritage from both the frontier and aristocracy.

The primitive contribution might be summarized as: "Too late to pull arrow from White Horse's chest. Leave White Horse to walk alone to Happy Hunting Grounds. . ."

And from Old World aristocracy: "Go on without me, chaps; afraid I'm done for. Bad show and all that. . ."

With two stiff upper lips — one very red and the other purest white — we have only the legacy and none of the conditioning that made such heroism not only possible but safe!

We generally regard Indians as stoics from birth. But the remarkable fact is that they practiced — fully, without any ifs and buts — what we like to think of as progressive education. They eliminated childhood frustrations by giving their youngsters *anything* they cried for.

Far from spoiling them, this gave the kids a wholly unshakable sense of worth that allowed them to become complete adults. For only an unhappy, thwarted, unresolved childhood has to be clung to.

Aristocratic upbringing was unswervingly strict, but it had the advantage of a deep conviction of worth by birth. But even this is fairly recent; a man's nobility used to be measured by the violence of his emotions.

Take away the means to the stiff upper lip and the payoff is packed hospitals. Yet we can't carry progressive upbringing as far as the Indians did and have a technological society. And aristocracy isn't possible for everybody — it requires hereditary lower classes to feel superior to.

So these are not the answers; we must look elsewhere. An important lead is that women, generally allowed to be more emotional, have only half as much mental illness as men — and that those who do have been victimized in the same way as



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men: "Sissy!" and "Cry Baby!" and "Big girls don't cry."

In other words, the problem of mental illness is literally a crying need.

But a technological society demands discipline and would, without it, disintegrate through confusion and accidents and disobedience.

The solution, then, must be in the home. If we can't have the conditioning, let's do away with the stiff upper lip. And the place to do it is in the Tantrum Room, which my family and I designed one very stormy Sunday morning — *after* tempers had cooled off.

Set apart from the rest of the house, the Tantrum Room should have a baseboard for kicking (foam rubber, no sharp edges), a dummy punching bag (with recess for photograph) and breakaway furniture, cheap ashtrays and crockery for smashing or throwing.

A microphone and loudspeaker for yelling, with meter to show how many decibels one achieves; this should be a source of pride — restrained yelling is only a bit better than none.

A floor that one can *really* stamp around on.

A chair (facing corner) for sulking.

A gym mat for kicking heels.

Pictures of family, friends, relatives, bosses, with rubber balls and darts to hurl at them.

Crying towel for each member of the family, in favorite personal color.

Hand-grips for clenching, plus one (shaped like neck) for vicarious throttling.

Sledges and targets, from peg set for toddlers to carnival bell-ringer for adults.

Rural areas have equivalents of all these items as everyday farm and household equipment. This may be why mental health is better there than in cities; ruralites can work off their feelings and urbanites can't without causing a row or a neighborhood scandal.

My son Eugene came up with the most significant idea of all — since a Tantrum Room should be soundproofed, he suggested a tape recorder *"So nothing will get wasted."*

He's right. A tantrum is a form of communication — what's the good of throwing one if it isn't heard, sympathized with and understood?

Where individual Tantrum Rooms aren't possible, apartment buildings and communities ought to supply them.

A slogan is needed for the program. I offer: "Yell and Keep Well!" or "Let's Stamp Out Stiff Upper Lips NOW!"

— H. L. GOLD



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# The Flat-Eyed Monster

By WILLIAM TENN

***It was bad enough hearing questions — but they weren't addressed to him and nobody bothered to listen whenever he answered!***

FOR the first few moments, Clyde Manship, who up to then had been an assistant professor of Comparative Literature at Kelly University, for the first few moments, Manship tried heroically to convince himself that he was merely having a bad dream. He shut his eyes and told himself chidingly, with a little superior smile playing about his lips, that things as ugly as this just did not occur in real life. No. Definitely a dream.

He had himself half convinced, until he sneezed. It was too loud

Illustrated by ASHMAN

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and wet a sneeze to be ignored. You didn't sneeze like that in a dream — if you sneezed at all. He gave up. He'd have to open his eyes and take another look. At the thought, his neck muscles went rigid with spasm.

A little while ago, he'd fallen asleep while reading an article he'd written for a scholarly journal. He'd fallen asleep in his own bed in his own apartment in Callahan Hall — "a charming and inexpensive residence for those members of the faculty who are bachelors and desire to live on campus." He'd awakened with a slightly painful tingling sensation in every inch of his body. He felt as if he were being stretched, stretched interminably and — and *loosened*. Then, abruptly, he had floated off the bed and gone through the open window like a rapidly attentuating curl of smoke. He'd gone straight up to the star-drenched sky of night, dwindling in substance until he lost consciousness completely.

AND had come to on this enormous flat expanse of white table-top, with a multi-vaulted ceiling above him and dank, barely breathable air in his lungs. Hanging from the ceiling were quantities and quantities of what was indubitably electronic equipment, but the kind of equipment the boys in the Physics Department might dream up, if the grant they'd just received from the government for military radiation research had been a million times larger than it was, and if Professor Bowles, the department head, had insisted that every gadget be carefully constructed to look substantially different from anything done in electronics to date.

The equipment above him had been rattling and gurgling and whooshing, glowing and blinking and coruscating. Then it had stopped as if someone had been satisfied and had turned off a switch.

So Clyde Manship had sat up to see who had turned it off.

He had seen all right.

He hadn't seen so much *who* as he had seen *what*. And it hadn't been a nice *what*. In fact, none of the *whats* he had glimpsed in that fast look around had been a bit nice. So he had shut his eyes fast and tried to find another mental way out of the situation.

But now he had to have another look. It might not be so bad the second time. "It's always darkest," he told himself with determined triteness, "before the dawn." And then found himself involuntarily adding, "Except on days when there's an eclipse."

But he opened his eyes any-



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way, wincingly, the way a child opens its mouth for the second spoonful of castor oil.

Yes, they were all as he had remembered them. Pretty awful.

The table-top was an irregular sort of free-form shape, bordered by thick, round knobs a few inches apart. And perched on these knobs, about six feet to the right of him, were two creatures who looked like black leather suitcases. Instead of handles or straps, however, they sported a profusion of black tentacles, dozens and dozens of tentacles, every second or third one of which ended in a moist turquoise eye shielded by a pair of the sweepingest eyelashes Manship had ever seen outside of a mascara advertisement.

Imbedded in the suitcase proper, as if for additional decorative effect, were swarms of other sky-blue eyes, only these, without eyelashes, bulged out in multitudes of tiny, glittering facets like enormous gems. There was no sign of ear, nose or mouth anywhere on the bodies, but there was a kind of slime, a thick, grayish slime, that oozed out of the black bodies and dripped with a steady splash-splash-splash to the floor beneath.

On his left, about fifteen feet away, where the table-top extended a long peninsula, there was another one of the creatures. Its tentacles gripped a pulsating spheroid across the surface of which patches of light constantly appeared and disappeared.

AS NEAR as Manship could tell, all the visible eyes of the three were watching him intently. He shivered and tried to pull his shoulders closer together.

"Well, Professor," someone asked suddenly, "what would you say?"

"I'd say this was one hell of a way to wake up," Manship burst out, feelingly. He was about to go on and develop this theme in more colorful detail when two things stopped him.

The first was the problem of who had asked the question. He had seen no other human — no other living creature, in fact — besides the three tentacled suitcases anywhere in that tremendous, moisture-filled room.

The second thing that stopped him was that someone else had begun to answer the question at the same time, cutting across Manship's words and ignoring them completely.

"Well, obviously," this person said, "the experiment is a success. It has completely justified its expense and the long years of research behind it. You can see for yourself, Councilor Glomg, that



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one-way teleportation is an accomplished fact."

Manship realized that the voices were coming from his right. The wider of the two suitcases — evidently "the professor" to whom the original query had been addressed — was speaking .o the narrower one who had swung most of his stalked eyes away from Manship and had focused them on his companion. Only where in blazes were the voices coming from? Somewhere inside their bodies? There was no sign anywhere of vocal apparatus.

AND HOW COME, Manship's mind suddenly shrieked, THEY TALK ENGLISH?

"I can see that," Councilor Glomg admitted with a blunt honesty that became him well. "It's an accomplished fact, all right, Professor Lirld. Only, *what precisely* has it accomplished?"

Lirld raised some thirty or forty tentacles in what Manship realized fascinatedly was an elaborate and impatient shrug. "The teleportation of a living organism from astronomical unit 649-301-3 without the aid of transmitting apparatus on the planet of origin."

The Councilor swept his eyes back to Manship. "You call that living?" he inquired doubtfully.

"Oh, come now, Councilor," Professor Lirld protested. "Let's not have any flefnomorphism. It is obviously sentient, obviously motile, after a fashion —"

"All right. It's alive. I'll grant that. But sentient? It doesn't even seem to *pmbff* from where I stand. And those horrible, lonely eyes! Just two of them — and so *flat!* That dry, dry skin without a trace of slime. I'll admit that —"

"You're not exactly a thing of beauty and a joy forever yourself, you know," Manship, deeply offended, couldn't help throwing out indignantly.

"— I tend to flefnomorphism in my evaluation of alien lifeforms," the other went on as if he hadn't spoken. "Well, I'm a flefnobe and proud of it. But after all, Professor Lirld, I have seen some impossible creatures from our neighboring planets that my son and other explorers have brought back. The very strangest of them, the most primitive ones, at least can *pmbff!* But this — this *thing*. Not the smallest, slightest trace of a *pmb* do I see on it! It's eerie, that's what it is — eerie!"

"Not at all," Lirld assured him. "It's merely a scientific anomaly. Possibly in the outer reaches of the Galaxy where animals of this sort are frequent, possibly conditions are such that *pmbffing* is unnecessary. A careful examina-



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tion should tell us a good deal very quickly. Meanwhile, we've proved that life exists in other areas of the Galaxy than its sun-packed core. And when the time comes for us to conduct exploratory voyages to these areas, intrepid adventurers like your son will go equipped with information. They will know what to expect."

"Now, listen," Manship began shouting in desperation. "Can you or can you not hear me?"

"You can shut off the power, Srin," Professor Lirld commented. "No sense in wasting it. I believe we have as much of this creature as we need. If any more of it is due to materialize, it will arrive on the residual beam."

THE flefnobe on Manship's left rapidly spun the strange spheroid he was holding. A low hum, which had filled the building and had been hardly noticeable before, now died away. As Srin peered intently at the patches of light on the surface of the instrument, Manship suddenly guessed that they were meter readings. Yes, that's exactly what they were — meter readings. *Now, how did I know that?* he wondered.

Obvious. There was only one answer. If they couldn't hear him no matter how loudly he shouted, if they gave no sign that they even knew he *was* shouting, and if, at the same time, they seemed to indulge in the rather improbable feat of talking his native language — they were obviously telepaths. Without anything that looked like ears or mouths.

He listened carefully as Srin asked his superior a question. It seemed to sound in his ears as words, English words in a clear, resonant voice. But there was a difference. There was a quality missing, the kind of realistic bite that fresh fruit has and artificial fruit flavoring doesn't. And behind Srin's words there were low, murmuring bubbles of other words, unorganized sentence fragments which would occasionally become "audible" enough to clarify a subject that was not included in the "conversation." That, Manship realized, was how he had learned that the shifting patches of light on the spheroid were meter readings.

It was also evident that whenever they mentioned something for which no equivalent at all existed in English, his mind supplied him with a nonsense syllable.

So far so good. He'd been plucked out of his warm bed in Callahan Hall by a telepathic suitcase named something like Lirld which was equipped with



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quantities of eyes and tentacles. He'd been sucked down to some planet in an entirely different system near the center of the Galaxy, clad in nothing but apple-green pajamas.

He was on a world of telepaths who couldn't hear him at all, but upon whom he could eavesdrop with ease, his brain evidently being a sufficiently sensitive antenna. He was scheduled shortly to undergo a "careful examination," a prospect he did not relish, the more so as he was evidently looked upon as a sort of monstrous laboratory animal. Finally, he was not thought much of, chiefly because he couldn't *pmbff* worth a damn.

All in all, Clyde Manship decided, it was about time that he made his presence felt. Let them know, so to speak, that he was definitely not a lower form of life, but one of the boys. That he belonged to the mind-over-matter club himself and came of a long line of IQ-fanciers on both sides of his family.

Only *how?*

Vague memories of adventure stories read as a boy drifted back to him. Explorers land on a strange island. Natives, armed with assorted spears, clubs and small boulders, gallop out of the jungle to meet them, their whoops an indisputable prelude to mayhem. Explorers, sweating a bit, as they do not know the language of this particular island, must act quickly. Naturally, they resort to — they resort to — the universal sign language! *Sign* language. Universal!

STILL in a sitting position, Clyde Manship raised both arms straight up over his head. "Me *friend,*" he intoned. "Me come in peace." He didn't expect the dialogue to get across, but it seemed to him that voicing such words might help him psychologically and thus add more sincerity to the gesture.

"— and you might as well turn off the recording apparatus, too," Professor Lirld was instructing his assistant. "From here on out, we'll take everything down on a double memory-fix."

Srin manipulated his spheroid again. "Think I should modulate the dampness, sir? The creature's dry skin seems to argue a desert climate."

"Not at all. I strongly suspect it to be one of those primitive forms which can survive in a variety of environments. The specimen seems to be getting along admirably. I tell you, Srin, we can be very well satisfied with the results of the experiment up to this point."

"Me friend," Manship went on



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desperately, raising and lowering his arms. "Me intelligent entity. Me have I.Q. of 140 on the Wechsler-Bellevue scale."

"*You* may be satisfied," Glomg was saying, as Lirld left the table with a light jump and floated, like an oversized dandelion, to a mass of equipment overhead, "but I'm not. I don't like this business one little bit."

"Me friendly *and* intelligent enti —" Manship began. He sneezed again. "Damn this wet air," he muttered morosely.

"What was *that?*" Glomg demanded.

"Nothing very important, Councilor," Srin assured him. "The creature did it before. It is evidently a low-order biological reaction that takes place periodically, possibly a primitive method of imbibing *glrnk*. Not by any stretch of the imagination a means of communication, however."

"I wasn't thinking of communication," Glomg observed testily. "I thought it might be a prelude to aggressive action."

The professor skimmed back to the table, carrying a skein of luminescent wires. "Hardly. What could a creature of this sort be aggressive *with?* I'm afraid you're letting your mistrust of the unknown run away with you, Councilor Glomg."

Manship had crossed his arms across his chest and subsided into a helpless silence. There was evidently no way to make himself understood outside of telepathy. And how do you start transmitting telepathically for the first time? What do you use?

If only his doctoral thesis had been in biology or physiology, he thought wistfully, instead of *The Use of the Second Aorist in the First Three Books of the Iliad.* Oh, well. He was a long way from home. Might as well try.

HE CLOSED his eyes, having first ascertained that Professor Lirld did not intend to approach his person with the new piece of equipment. He wrinkled his forehead and leaned forward with an effort of extreme concentration.

*Testing,* he thought as hard as he could, *testing, testing. One, two, three, four — testing, testing. Can you hear me?*

"I just don't like it," Glomg announced again. "I don't like what we're doing here. Call it a presentiment, call it what you will, but I feel we are tampering with the infinite — and we shouldn't."

*I'm testing,* Manship ideated frantically. *Mary had a little lamb. Testing, testing. I'm the alien creature and I'm trying to*



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*communicate with you. Come in, please.*

"Now, Councilor," Lirld protested irritably. "Let's have none of that. This is a scientific experiment."

"That's all very well. But I believe there are mysteries that flefnobe was never meant to examine. Monsters as awful looking as this — no slime on the skin, only two eyes and both of them flat, unable or unwilling to *pmbff*, an almost complete absence of tentacles — a creature of this sort should have been left undisturbed on its own hellish planet. There are limits to science, my learned friend — or there should be. One should not seek to know the unknowable!"

*Can't you hear me?* Manship begged. *Alien entity to Srin, Lirld and Glomg: This is an attempt at a telepathic connection. Come in, please, someone. Anyone.* He considered for a moment, then added: *Roger. Over.*

"I don't recognize such limitations, Councilor. My curiosity is as vast as the Universe."

"That may be," Glomg rejoined portentously. "But there are more things in *Tiz* and *Tetzbah*, Professor Lirld, than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

"My philosophy —" Lirld began, and broke off to announce — "Here's your son. Why don't you ask him? Without the benefit of half a dozen scientific investigations that people like you have wanted to call off time after time, none of his heroic achievements in interplanetary discovery would be possible."

Thoroughly defeated, but still curious, Manship opened his eyes in time to see an extremely narrow black suitcase swarm up to the table-top in a spaghetti-cluster of tentacles.

"What is — *that?*" the newcomer inquired, curling a bunch of supercilious eye-stalks over Manship's head. "It looks like a *yurd* with a bad case of *hipplestatch.*" He considered for a moment, then added, "Galloping *hipplestatch.*"

"It's a creature from astronomical unit 649-301-3 that I've just succeeded in teleporting to our planet," Lirld told him proudly. "Mind you, Rabd, without a transmitting outfit on the other end! I admit I don't know why it worked this time and never before — but that's a matter for further research. A beautiful specimen, though, Rabd. And, as near as we can tell, in perfect condition. You can put it away now, Srin."

"Oh, no you don't, Srin —" Manship had barely started to announce when a great rectangle of some pliable material fell from



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the ceiling and covered him. A moment later, the table-top on which he'd been sitting seemed to drop away and the ends of the material were gathered in underneath him and fastened with a click by a scuttling individual whom he took to be the assistant. Then, before he had time to so much as wave his arms, the table-top shot up with an abruptness that he found twice as painful as it was disconcerting.

AND there he was, packaged as thoroughly as a birthday present. All in all, things were not improving, he decided. Well, at least they seemed disposed to leave him alone now. And as yet they showed no tendency to shove him up on a laboratory shelf along with dusty jars of flefnobe foetuses pickled in alcohol.

The fact that he was probably the first human being in history to make contact with an extraterrestrial race failed to cheer Clyde Manship in the slightest.

First, he reflected, the contact had been on a distinctly minor key — the sort that an oddly colored moth makes with a collector's bottle rather than a momentous meeting between the proud representatives of two different civilizations.

Second, and much more important, this sort of hands-across-the-cosmos affair was more likely to enthuse an astronomer, a sociologist or even a physicist than an assistant professor of Comparative Literature.

He'd had fantastic daydreams aplenty in his lifetime. But they concerned being present at the premiere of *Macbeth*, for example, and watching a sweating Shakespeare implore Burbage not to shout out the "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow" speech in the last act: "For God's sake, Dick, your wife just died and you're about to lose your kingdom and your life — don't let it sound like Meg at the Mermaid screaming for a dozen of ale. *Philosophical,* Dick, that's the idea, slow, mournful and philosophical. And just a little bewildered."

Or he'd imagined being one of the company at that moment sometime before 700 B.C. when a blind poet rose and intoned for the first time: "Anger, *extreme* anger, that is my tale . . ."

Or being a house guest at Yasnaya Polyana when Tolstoy wandered in from the garden with an abstracted look on his face and muttered: "Just got an idea for a terrific yarn about the Napoleonic invasion of Russia. And what a title! *War and Peace.* Nothing pretentious, nothing



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complicated. Just simply *War and Peace.* It'll knock them dead in St. Petersburg, I tell you. Of course, it's just a bare little short story at the moment, but I'll probably think of a couple of incidents to pad it out."

Travel to the Moon and the other planets of the Solar System, let alone a voyage to the center of the Galaxy — in his pajamas? No, that was definitely not a menu calculated to make Clyde Manship salivate. In this respect, he had wisted no farther afield than a glimpse, say, of Victor Hugo's sky-high balcony in St. Germain de Près or the isles of Greece where burning Sappho loved and, from time to time as it occurred to her, sang.

Professor Bowles, now, Bowles or any of the other slipstick-sniffers in the physics department — what those boys would give to be in his position! To be the subject of an actual experiment far beyond the dreams of even theory on Earth, to be exposed to a technology that was patently so much more advanced than theirs—why, they would probably consider that, in exchange for all this, the vivisection that Manship was morosely certain would end the evening's festivities was an excellent bargain and verged on privilege. The physics department . . .

MANSHIP suddenly recalled the intricately weird tower, studded with gray dipoles, that the physics department had been erecting in Murphy field. He'd watched the government-subsidized project in radiation research going up from his window in Callahan Hall.

Only the evening before, when it had reached the height of his window, he'd reflected that it looked more like a medieval siege engine designed to bring down walled cities than a modern communicative device.

But now, with Lirld's comment about one-way teleportation never having worked before, he found himself wondering whether the uncompleted tower, poking a ragged section of electronic superstructure at his bedroom window, had been partially responsible for this veritable purée-of-nightmare he'd been wading through.

Had it provided a necessary extra link with Lirld's machine, sort of an aerial connection or grounding wire or whatever? If only he knew a little physics! Eight years of higher education were inadequate to suggest the barest aye or nay.

He gnashed his teeth, went too far and bit his tongue — and was forced to suspend mental operations until the pain died away



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and the tears dribbled out of his eyes.

What if he knew for certain that the tower had played a potent, though passive, part in his removal through interstellar space? What if he knew the exact part it had played in terms of megavolts and amperages and so forth — would the knowledge be the slightest use to him in this impossible situation?

No, he'd still be a hideous flat-eyed, non-intelligent monster plucked pretty much at random from the outer reaches of the Universe, surrounded by creatures to whose minds his substantial knowledge of the many literatures of astronomical unit 649-301-3 would probably come across, allowing even for the miracle of translation, as so much schizophrenic word-salad.

In his despair, he plucked hopelessly at the material in which he'd been wrapped. Two small sections came away in his fingers.

There wasn't enough light to examine them, but the feel was unmistakable. Paper. He was wrapped in an oversized sheet of something very much like paper.

It made sense, he thought, it made sense in its own weird way. Since the appendages of the flefnobes he had seen to date consisted of nothing more than slender tentacles ending in either eyes or tapered points, and since they seemed to need knoblike protuberances on the laboratory table in order to perch beside him, a cage of paper was pretty much escape-proof from their point of view. There was nothing for their tentacles to grip — and they evidently didn't have the musculature to punch their way through.

Well, he did. Athletically, he had never amounted to much, but he believed, given enough of an emergency, in his ability to fight his way out of a paper bag. It was a comforting thought, but, at the moment, only slightly more useful than the nugget about the tower in Murphy Field.

If only there were some way of transmitting *that* bit of information to Lirld's little group: Maybe they'd realize that the current flefnobe version of *The Mindless Horror from Hyperspace* had a few redeeming intellectual qualities, and maybe they could work out a method of sending him back. If they wanted to.

Only he couldn't transmit information. All he could do, for some reason peculiar to the widely separate evolutionary paths of man and flefnobe, was receive. So former Assistant Professor Clyde Manship sighed heavily, slumped his shoulders yet a further slump



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— and stolidly set himself to receive.

HE ALSO straightened his pajamas about him tenderly, not so much from latent sartorial ambition as because of agonizing twinges of nostalgia: he had suddenly realized that the inexpensive green garment with its heavily standardized cut was the only artifact he retained of his own world. It was the single souvenir, so to speak, that he possessed of the civilization which had produced both Tamurlane and *Terza Rima;* the pajamas were, in fact, outside of his physical body, his last link with Earth.

"So far as I'm concerned," Glomg's explorer son was commenting — it was obvious that the argument had been breezing right along and that the papery barrier didn't affect Manship's "hearing" in the slightest — "I can take these alien monsters or leave them alone. When they get as downright disgusting as this, of course, I'd rather leave them alone. But what I mean — I'm not afraid of tampering with the infinite, like Pop here, and on the other side, I can't believe that what you're doing, Professor Lirld, will ever lead to anything really important."

He paused, then went on. "I hope I haven't hurt your feelings, sir, but that's what I honestly think. I'm a practical flefnobe, and I believe in practical things."

"How can you say — nothing really important?" In spite of Rabd's apology, the professor's mental "voice" as it registered on Manship's brain positively undulated with indignation. "Why, the greatest concern of flefnobe science at the moment is to achieve a voyage to some part of the outer Galaxy where the distances between stars are prodigious compared to their relative denseness here at the galactic center.

"We can travel at will between the fifty-four planets of our system and we have recently achieved flight to several of our neighboring suns, but going so far as even the middle areas of the Galaxy, where this specimen originates, remains as visionary a project today as it was before the dawn of extra-atmospheric flight over two centuries ago."

"Right!" Rabd broke in sharply. "And why? Because we don't have the ships capable of making the journey? Not on your *sembleswol,* Professor! Why, since the development of the *Bulvonn* Drive, any ship in the flefnobe navy or merchant marine, down to my little three-jet runabout, could scoot out to a place as far as astronomical unit 649-301-3 — to name just one example —



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and back without even hotting up her engines. But we don't. And for a very good reason."

Clyde Manship was now listening — or receiving — so hard that the two halves of his brain seemed to grind against each other. He was very much interested in astronomical unit 649-301-3 and anything that made travel to it easier or more difficult, however exotic the method of transportation employed might be by prevailing terrestrial standards.

"And the reason, of course," the young explorer went on, "is a practical one. Mental dwindle. Good old mental dwindle. In two hundred years of solving every problem connected with space travel, we haven't so much as *pmbffed* the surface of *that* one. All we have to do is go a measly twenty light-years from the surface of our home planet and mental dwindle sets in with a bang. The brightest crews start acting like retarded children and, if they don't turn back right away, their minds go out like so many lights: they've dwindled mentally smack down to zero."

IT FIGURED, Manship decided excitedly, it figured. A telepathic race like the flefnobes . . . why, of course! Accustomed since earliest infancy to having the mental aura of the entire species about them at all times, dependent completely on telepathy for communication since there had never been a need for developing any other method, what loneliness, what ultimate magnification of loneliness, must they not feel once their ships had reached a point too far from their world to maintain contact!

And their education now — Manship could only guess at the educational system of a creature so different from himself, but surely it must be a kind of high-order and continual mental osmosis, a mutual mental osmosis. However it worked, their educational system probably accentuated the involvement of the individual with the group. Once the feeling of involvement became too tenuous, because of intervening barrier or overpowering stellar distance, the flefnobe's psychological disintegration was inevitable.

But all this was unimportant. There were interstellar spaceships in existence! There were vehicles that could take Clyde Manship back to Earth, back to Kelly University and the work-in-progress he hoped would eventually win him a full professorship in comparative literature: *Style vs. Content in Fifteen Representative Corporation Reports*



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*to Minority Stockholders for the Period* 1919-1931.

For the first time, hope sprang within his breast. A moment later, it was lying on its back and massaging a twisted knee. Because assume, just assume for the sake of argument, his native intelligence told him, that he could somehow get out of this place and pick his way about what was, by every indication, a complete oddity of a world, until he found the spaceships Rabd had mentioned — could it ever be believed by any imagination no matter how wild or fevered, his native intelligence continued, that he, Clyde Manship, whose fingers were all thumbs and whose thumbs were all knuckles, whose mechanical abilities would have made Swanscombe Man sneer and *Sinanthropus* snicker, could it be ever believed, his native intelligence inquired sardonically, that he'd be capable of working out the various gadgets of advanced spaceship design, let alone the peculiarities that highly unusual creatures like the flefnobes would inevitably have incorporated into their vessels?

Clyde Manship was forced to admit morosely that the entire project was somewhat less than possible. But he did tell his native intelligence to go straight to hell.

RABD now, though. *Rabd* could pilot him back to Earth if (a) Rabd found it worth-while personally and if (b) Rabd could be communicated with. Well, what interested Rabd most? Evidently this Mental Dwindle ranked quite high.

"If you'd come up with an answer to that, Professor," he was expostulating at this point, "I would cheer so hard I'd unship my *glrnk*. That's what's kept us boxed up here at the center of the Galaxy for too many years. That's the *practical* problem. But when you haul this *Qrm*-forsaken blob of protoplasm out of its hole halfway across the Universe and ask me what I think of it, I must tell you the whole business leaves me completely dry. This, to me, is not a practical experiment."

Manship caught the mental ripples of a nod from Rabd's father. "I'm forced to agree with you, son. Impractical and dangerous. And I think I can get the rest of the council to see it my way. Far too much has been spent on this project already."

As the resonance of their thoughts decreased slightly in volume, Manship deduced they were leaving the laboratory.

He heard the beginnings of a desperate, "But — but —" from Lirld. Then, off in the distance, Councilor Glomg, evidently hav-



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ing dismissed the scientist, asked his son a question, "And where is little Tekt? I thought she'd be with you."

"Oh, she's out at the landing field," Rabd answered, "supervising last-minute stuff going into the ship. After all, we begin our mating flight tonight."

"A wonderful female," Glomg told him in a "voice" that was now barely audible. "You're a very lucky flefnobe."

"I know that, Pop," Rabd assured him. "Don't think I don't know that. The most plentiful bunch of eye-ended tentacles this side of *Gansibokkle* and they're mine, all mine!"

"Tekt is a warm and highly intelligent female flefnobe," his father pointed out severely from a great distance. "She has many fine qualities. I don't like you acting as if the mating process were a mere matter of the number of eye-ended tentacles possessed by the female."

"Oh, it isn't, Pop," Rabd assured him. "It isn't at all. The mating process is a grave and — er, a serious matter to me. Full of responsibilities — er, *serious* responsibilities. Yes, sir. Highly serious. But the fact that Tekt has over a hundred and seventy-six slime-washed tentacles, each topped by a lovely, limpid eye, won't do our relationship a bit of harm. Quite the contrary, Pop, quite the contrary."

"A superstitious old crank and a brash bumpkin," Professor Lirld commented bitterly. "But between them, they can have my appropriation shut off, Srin. They can stop my work. Just when it's showing positive results. We've got to prepare countermeasures!"

MANSHIP was not interested in this all-too-familiar academic despair, however. He was straining desperately after the receding minds of Glomg and Rabd. Not that he was at all intrigued by the elder's advice on How to Have a Sane and Happy Sex Life though Married.

What had excited him prodigiously was a mental by-product of a much earlier comment. When Rabd had mentioned the last-minute loading of his ship, another part of the flefnobe's mind had, as if stimulated by association, dwelt briefly on the construction of the small vessel, its maintenance and, most important, its operation.

For just a few seconds, there had been a flash of a control panel with varicolored lights going on and off, and the beginnings of long-ago, often-repeated instruction: "To warm up the motors of the *Bulvonn* Drive, first gently rotate the uppermost



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three cylinders . . . Gently now!"

It was the kind of subliminal thought-picture, Manship realized excitedly, that had emanated from Srin a short while ago, and had enabled him to guess that the shifting light-patterns on the sphere the laboratory assistant held were actually meter readings. Evidently, his sensitivity to the flefnobe brain went deeper than the mental statements that were consciously transmitted by it and penetrated, if not the unconscious mind, at least the less submerged areas of personal awareness and memory.

But this meant — this meant — seated as he was, he still managed to stagger at the concept. A little practice, just a little acquired skill, and he could no doubt pick the brain of every flefnobe on the planet.

He sat and glowed at the thought. An ego that had never been particularly robust had been taking an especially ferocious pounding in the past half-hour under the contemptuous scrutiny of a hundred turquoise eyes and dozens of telepathic gibes. A personality that had been power-starved most of its adult life abruptly discovered it might well hold the fate of an entire planet in the hollow of its cerebrum.

Yes, this certainly made him feel a lot better. Every bit of information these flefnobes possessed was his for the taking. What, for example, did he feel like taking? For a starter, that is.

Manship remembered. His euphoria dwindled like a spat-upon match. There was only one piece of information he desired, only one thing he wanted to know. How to get home!

ONE of the few creatures on this planet, possibly the only one for all he knew, whose thoughts were of a type to make this possible, was on his way with his father to some flefnobe equivalent of Tony's Bar and Grill. Rabd had, in fact, to judge from the silence reigning on the subject, just this moment passed out of effective telepathic range.

With a hoarse, anguished, yearning cry, similar to that of a bull who — having got in a juicy lick with his horns and having been carried by the momentum of his rush the full length of the bull-ring — turns, only to see the attendants dragging the wounded matador out of the arena. With precisely that sort of thoroughly dismayed bellow, Clyde Manship reached up, tore the surrounding material apart with one mighty two-handed gesture, and leaped to his feet on the in-and-out curving table-top.

". . . And seven or eight charts



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in full color, representing the history of teleportation prior to this experiment," Lirld was telling his assistant at that moment. "In fact, Srin, if you have time to make *three-dimensional* charts, the Council is even more likely to be impressed. We're in a fight, Srin, and we've got to use every —"

His thoughts broke off as an eye-stalk curled around and regarded Manship. A moment later his entire complement of eye-stalks as well as those of his assistant swished about and stopped, quivering, with their focus on the erect, emergent human.

"Holy, concentrated *Qrm,*" the professor's mind barely transmitted the quavering thought. "The flat-eyed monster. It's broken loose!"

"Out of a cage of solid paper!" Srin added in awe.

Lirld came to a decision. "The blaster," he ordered peremptorily. "Tentacle me the blaster, Srin. Appropriation or no appropriation, we don't dare take chances with a creature like this. We're in a crowded city. Once it got out on a rampage —" He shuddered the entire black suitcase length of him. He made a rapid adjustment in the curlicued instrument that Srin had given him. He pointed it at Manship.

Having actually fought his way out of the paper bag, Manship had paused, irresolute, on the table-top. Far from being a man of action in any sense, he now found himself distinctly puzzled as to just which way to act. He had no idea of the direction taken by Glomg *père* and *fils;* furthermore he was at a loss as he looked around for anything that in any way resembled a door. He regretted very much not having noticed through which aperture Rabd had entered the room upon the occasion of the younger flefnobe's joining their jolly little circle.

He had just about made up his mind to look into a series of zig-zag indentations in the opposite wall, when he observed Lirld pointing the blaster at him with determined if unprofessional tremulousness. His mind, which had been filing the recent conversation between professor and assistant in an uninterested back-portion, suddenly informed him that he was about to become the first, and probably unrecorded victim, in a War of Worlds.

"Hey!" he yelped, entirely forgetting his meager powers of communication. "I just want to look up Rabd. I'm not going on any ramp —"

Lirld did something to the curlicued instrument that seemed like winding a clock, but was probably more equivalent to the



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pressing of a trigger. He simultaneously shut all of his eyes — no mean feat in itself.

THAT, Clyde Manship reflected later — when there was time and space to reflect — was the only thing which saved his life. That and the prodigious sideways broad-jump he made as millions of crackling red dots ripped out of the instrument toward him.

The red dots sped past his pajama-tops and into one of the lower vaults that made up the ceiling. Without a sound, a hole some ten feet in circumference appeared in the masonry. The hole was deep enough — some three or four feet — to let the night sky of the planet show through. A heavy haze of white powder drifted down like the dust from a well-beaten rug.

Staring at it, Manship felt the roll of tiny glaciers toward his heart. His stomach flattened out against its abdominal wall and tried to skulk quietly around his ribs. He had never felt so completely frightened in his life. "Hey-y-y —" he began.

"A little too much power, Professor," Srin observed judiciously from where he rested easily with tentacles outspread against the wall. "A little too much power and not enough *glrnk*. Try a little more *glrnk* and see what happens."

"Thank you," Lirld told him gratefully. "Like this, you mean?"

He raised and pointed the instrument again.

"Hey-y-y!" Manship continued in the same vein as before, not so much because he felt the results of such a statement would



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be particularly rewarding as because he lacked, at the moment, the creative faculties for another, more elaborate comment. "Hey-y-y-y!" he repeated between chattering teeth, staring at Lirld out of eyes no longer entirely flat.

He held up a shaking, admonishing hand. Fear was gibbering through him like the news of panic through a nation of monkeys. He watched the flefnobe make the peculiar winding trigger adjustment again. His thoughts came to a stop and every muscle in his body seemed to tense unendurably.

Suddenly Lirld shook. He slid



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backward along the table-top. The weapon dropped out of stiffened tentacles and smashed into bunches of circular wires that rolled in all directions. "Srin!" his mind whimpered. "Srin! The monster — Do — do you see what's coming out of his eyes? He's — he's —"

His body cracked open and a pale, blue goo poured out. Tentacles dropped off him like so many long leaves in a brisk autumn wind. The eyes that studded his surface turned from turquoise to a dull brown. "*Srin!*" he begged in a tiny, faraway thought. "Help me — the flat-eyed monster is — help — help!"

And then he dissolved. Where he had been, there was nothing but a dark liquid, streaked with blue, that flowed and bubbled and dripped off the curving edge of the table.

Manship stared at it uncomprehendingly, realizing only one thing fully — he was still alive.

A flicker of absolutely mad, stampeding fear reached him from Srin's mind. The laboratory assistant jumped from the wall against which he'd been standing, skidded across the table-top with thrashing tentacles, paused for a moment at the knobs that lined its edge to get the necessary traction — and then leaped in an enormous arc to the far wall of the building. The zig-zag indentations widened in a sort of lightning flash to let his body through.

So that *had* been a door after all. Manship found himself feeling rather smug at the deduction. With so little to go on — pretty smart, *pretty* smart.

AND then the various parts of his brain caught up with current events and he began trembling from the reaction. He should be dead, a thing of shredded flesh and powdered bone. What had happened?

Lirld had fired the weapon at him and missed the first time. Just as he was about to fire again, something had struck the flefnobe about as hard as it had the Assyrian back in the days when the latter was in the habit of coming down like the wolf on the fold. *What?* Manship had been using no weapon of his own. He had, so far as he knew, no ally on this world. He looked about the huge, vaulted room. Silence. There was nothing else, nobody else in the place.

What was it the professor had screamed telepathically before he turned into soup? Something about Manship's eyes? Something *coming* out of the Earthman's eyes?

Still intensely puzzled — and



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despite his relief at having survived the last few minutes — Manship could not help regretting Lirld's extinction. Possibly because of his somewhat similar occupational status, the flefnobe had been the only creature of his type toward whom Manship felt any sympathy. He felt a little lonelier now — and, obscurely, a little guilty.

The different thoughts which had been mashing themselves to and fro in his mind abruptly disappeared, to be replaced by a highly important observation.

The zig-zag doorway through which Srin had fled was closing, was coming together! And, as far as Manship knew, it was the only way out of the place!

Manship bounced off the huge table-top in a jump that for the second time in ten minutes did great credit to a few semester hours of gym some six years ago. He reached the narrowing gap, prepared to claw his way through the solid stone if necessary.

He was determined not to be trapped in this place when the flefnobe police closed in with whatever they used in place of tear gas and machine guns. He had also not forgotten the need to catch up to Rabd and get two or three more driving lessons.

To his intense relief, the aperture dilated again as he was about to hit it. Some sort of photoelectric gadget, he wondered, or was it just sensitive to the approach of a body?

He charged through, and for the first time found himself on the surface of the planet with the night sky all around him.

THE view of the sky almost took his breath away and made him forget, temporarily, the utterly strange city of the flefnobes that stretched away in every direction.

There were so many stars! It was as if these stellar bodies were so much confectioners' sugar and someone had tossed a bagful at the heavens. They glowed with enough luminosity to maintain a three-quarters twilight. There was no moon, but its lack was not felt; rather it seemed that half a dozen moons had been broken up into quadrillions of tiny white dots.

It would be impossible, in this plenty, to trace out a single constellation. It would be necessary, instead, Manship guessed, to speak of a third brightest patch, a fifth largest sector. Truly, here in the center of the Galaxy, one did not merely see the stars — one lived amongst them!

He noticed his feet were wet. Glancing down, he saw he was standing in a very shallow stream



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of some reddish liquid that flowed between the rounded flefnobe buildings. Sewage disposal? Water supply? Probably neither, probably something else completely out of the range of human needs. For there were other colored streams flowing parallel to it, Manship saw now — green ones, mauve ones, bright pink ones. At a street intersection a few yards from him, the reddish stream flowed away by itself down a sort of alley, while a few new colored ribbons joined the main body.

Well, he wasn't here to work out problems in extraterrestrial sociology. He already had the sniffling intimations of a bad head cold. Not only his feet were wet in this spongelike atmosphere; his pajamas clung to his skin in dampest companionship and, every once in a while, his eyes got blurry with the moisture and he had to brush them dry with the back of a hand.

Furthermore, while he was not hungry, he had not only seen nothing resembling human-type victuals since his arrival, but also no evidence to suggest that the flefnobes had stomachs, let alone mouths.

Maybe they took in nourishment through the skin, soaked it up, say, from those differently colored streams than ran through their city. Red might be meat, green could be vegetables, while for dessert —

He clenched his fists and shook himself. *I've no time for any of this philosophic badminton,* he told himself fiercely. *In just a few hours, I'm going to be extremely hungry and thirsty. I'm also going to be extremely hunted. I'd better get moving — work out some solutions!*

Only where? Fortunately, the street outside Lirld's laboratory seemed deserted. Maybe the flefnobes were afraid of the dark? Maybe they were all good, respectable homebodies and everyone, without exception, toddled into his bed at night to sleep the darkness through? Maybe —

Rabd. He had to find Rabd. That was the beginning and the end of the only solution to his problems he had come even close to, since his materialization on Professor Lirld's lab table.

Rabd.

HE TRIED "listening" with his mind. All kinds of drifting, miscellaneous thoughts were sloshing around in his brain, from the nearer inhabitants of the city.

"All right, darling, all right. If you don't want to *gadl,* you don't have to *gadl.* We'll do something else. . ."

"That smart-aleck Bohrg! Will



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I fix him properly tomorrow. . ."

"Do you have three *zamshkins* for a *plet?* I want to make a long-distance send. . ."

"Bohrg will roll in tomorrow morning, thinking everything is the same as it's always been. Is he going to be surprised. . ."

"I like you, Nernt, I like you a lot. And that's why I feel it's my duty to tell you, strictly as a friend, you understand. . ."

"No, darling, I didn't mean that *I* didn't want to *gadl.* I thought *you* didn't want to; I was trying to be considerate like you always tell me to be. *Of course* I want to *gadl.* Now please don't look at me like that. . ."

"Listen here. I can lick any flefnobe in the place. . ."

"To tell you the truth, Nernt, I think you're the only one who doesn't know. Everybody else. . . "

"So you're all scared, huh? All right, I'll take you on two at a time. Come on, *come on.* . ."

But no hint of Rabd. Manship began to walk cautiously down the stone-paved street, sloshing through the little rivulets.

He stepped too close to the wall of the dark buildings. Immediately, a zig-zag doorway opened its jagged invitation. He hesitated for a moment, then stepped through.

Nobody here either. Did the flefnobes sleep in some central building, dormitory fashion? Did they sleep at all? He must remember to tune in on some likely mind and investigate. The information might be useful.

This building seemed to be a warehouse; it was filled with shelves. The walls were bare, however — there seemed to be some flefnobe inhibition against putting objects against the walls. The shelves rose in tall tiers — again free-form shapes — from the center of the floor.

Manship strolled over to the shelving that was the height of his chest. Dozens of fat green balls rested in white porcelain cups. Food? Could be. They looked distinctly edible, like melons.

He reached out and picked one up. It immediately spread wings and flew away to the ceiling. Every one of the other green balls, on all the shelves, spread a similar set of multiple, tiny wings and flew upward, like so many spherical birds whose nests have been disturbed. When they reached the domed ceiling, they seemed to disappear.

Manship backed out of the place hurriedly through the jagged aperture. He seemed to be setting off alarms wherever he went!



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ONCE out in the street, he sensed a new feeling. There was a sensation of bubbling excitement everywhere, a tense waiting. Very few individual thoughts were coming through.

Suddenly the restlessness coalesced into an enormous mental shout that almost deafened him.

"Good evening!" it said. "Please stand by for an emergency news bulletin. This is Pukr, the son of Kimp, coming to you on a planet-wide, mind-to-mind hookup. Here is the latest on the flat-eyed monster:

"At forty-three *skims* past *bebblewort,* tonight, this creature was materialized by Professor Lirld from astronomical unit 649-301-3 as part of an experiment in one-way teleportation. Councilor Glomg was present as a witness to the experiment in the course of his official duties and, observing the aggressive way in which the monster comported itself, immediately warned Lirld of the dangers in letting it remain alive.

"Lirld disregarded the warning and, later, after Councilor Glomg had departed with his son, Rabd, the well-known interplanetary explorer and flefnobe-about-town, the monster ran amuck. Having fought its way out of a cage of solid paper, it attacked the professor with an unknown type of high-frequency mental beam that seems to emanate from its unbelievably flat eyes. This beam seems to be similar, in effect, to that thrown out by second-order *grepsas* when all fuses have blown. Our best psychophysicists are, at this very moment, working feverishly on that aspect of the problem.

"But Professor Lirld paid with his life for his scientific curiosity and for disregarding the warnings of Councilor Glomg's experience. Despite the best efforts of Srin, Lirld's laboratory assistant, who fought a desperate and courageous diversionary action in an attempt to save the old scientist, Lirld perished horribly before the monster's ferocious onslaught. With his superior dead, Srin retreated tentacle by tentacle, fighting all the way, barely managing to make his escape in time.

"This alien monster with its incredible powers is now loose in our city! All citizens are urged to remain calm, not to panic. Rest assured that as soon as the authorities know what to do, they will do it. Remember — above all — stay calm!

"Meanwhile, Rabd, the son of Glomg, has postponed his mating flight which was to have begun tonight. He is mating, as you all know, with Tekt, the daughter of Hilp — Tekt being the well-



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known star of *fnesh* and *bleIg* from the southern continent. Rabd is leading a troop of volunteer flefnobes to the scientific quarters of the city, where the monster was last seen, in an attempt to exterminate it with already-existing, conventional weapons before the creature starts to reproduce. I will return with more bulletins when they are available. That is all for now."

THAT was more than enough, Manship felt. Now there wasn't any hope that he could work out some method of communication with these creatures and sit down for a little quiet conversation on ways and means of getting himself home — which seemed to be a conclusion earnestly desired by all. From now on the watchword was going to be *Get That Manship!*

He didn't like that at all.

On the other hand, he didn't have to wander after Rabd. If Manship can't get to the flefnobe, the flefnobe will come to Manship. Heavily armed, however, and with homicidal intent. . .

He decided he had better hide. He stepped up to a building and wandered along a wall until the doorway opened. He walked through and watched it close behind him, then looked around.

To his relief, it seemed like an excellent place to hide. There were quantities of large, heavy objects in the center of the place, none of them, so far as he could tell, alive, and all of them satisfactorily opaque. He wedged himself between two of these which looked like stored table-tops and hoped wistfully that the flefnobe sensory appartus did not boast any more detective mechanisms than he had already experienced.

What he wouldn't give to be an assistant professor in Kelly University again instead of a flat-eyed monster ravening, all unwittingly, through an alien metropolis!

He found himself wondering about the strange powers he was supposed to possess. What was all this nonsense about a high-frequency mental beam emanating from his eyes? He hadn't noticed anything coming out — and he should have noticed if anyone did, he felt. Yet Lirld had made some comment to that effect just before he dissolved.

Was it possible that there was some by-product of the human brain that was only visible to flefnobes and was highly deleterious to them?

After all, he could tune in on the flefnobes' minds and they couldn't tune in on his. Maybe the only way he could make his mental presence felt to them was



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in some prodigious blast of thought which literally ripped them apart.

But he evidently couldn't turn it on and off at will — he hadn't caused the slightest alteration in Lirld, the first time the professor had fired.

There were ripples of new, excited thoughts reaching him suddenly. They were coming from somewhere in the street outside.

Rabd had arrived with his posse.

"THREE of you move down that way," the young flefnobe ordered. "I want two each to cover the side streets. Don't spend too much time searching through the buildings. I'm positive we'll find this monster skulking somewhere in the dark streets, looking for new victims. Tanj, Zogt and Lewv — come with me. And keep on your tentacle-tips, everybody — this thing is crazy dangerous. But remember, we've got to blast it before it starts reproducing. Imagine what this planet would be like with a couple of hundred of these flat-eyed monsters running around!"

Manship let out a long, slow sigh of relief. If they hoped to find him on the streets, he might have a little time.

He let his mind follow that of Rabd. It wasn't too hard — just a matter of concentration — and you pretty much blocked out the thoughts of the other individuals. *Follow Rabd's mind. Rabd's thoughts. Now block out most of Rabd's conscious thoughts. There. The subliminal layer, the memory patterns. No, not the stuff about that female flefnobe last month, all eyes and soft tentacles, dammit!*

*The memory patterns, the older ones.* "When landing on a C-12 type planet . . ." *No, not that one. A little further. There!* "Having fired the forward jet to clear it, gently depress the . . ."

Manship combed through the operational instructions in Rabd's mind, pausing every once in a while to clear up a concept peculiar to flefnobe terminology, stopping now and then as a grinning thought about Tekt wandered in and threw everything out of focus.

He noticed that whatever information he absorbed in this fashion, he seemed to absorb permanently; there was no need to go back to previous data. Probably left a permanent print on his mind, he concluded.

He had it all now, at least as much about running the ship as it was possible to understand. In the last few moments, he had been operating the ship — and operating the ship for years and



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years — at least through Rabd's memories. For the first time, Manship began to feel a little confident.

But how was he to find the little spaceship in the streets of this utterly strange city? He clasped his hands in perspired bafflement. After all this —

Then he had the answer. He'd get the directions from Rabd's mind. Of course. Good old encyclopedia Rabd! *He'd* certainly remember where he parked the vessel.

And he did. With a skill that seemed to have come from ages of practice, Clyde Manship riffled through the flefnobe's thoughts, discarding this one, absorbing that one — ". . . the indigo stream for five blocks. Then take the first merging red one and . . ." — until he had as thorough and as permanent a picture of the route to Rabd's three-jet runabout as if he'd been studying the subject in graduate school for six months.

PRETTY good going for a stodgy young assistant professor of Comparative Literature who up to this night had about as much experience with telepathy as African lion-hunting! But perhaps — perhaps it had been a matter of *conscious* experience of telepathy; perhaps the human mind was accustomed to a sort of regular, deep-in-the-brain, unconscious telepathy from infancy and being exposed to creatures so easy to receive from as flefnobes had brought the latently exercised powers to the surface.

That would explain the quickly acquired skill that felt so much like the sudden surprising ability to type whole words and sentences after months of practicing nothing but meaningless combinations of letters in certain set alphabetical patterns.

Well, it might be interesting, but that particular speculation was not his field of research and not his problem. Not for tonight, anyway.

Right now, what he had to do was somehow slip out of the building unobserved by the crowd of flefnobe vigilantes outside, and get on his way fast. After all, it might not be long before the militia was called out to deal with something as viciously destructive as himself. . .

He slipped out of his hiding-place and made for the wall. The zig-zag doorway opened. He stepped through — and bowled over a tentacled black suitcase who'd apparently been coming in.

The flefnobe recovered fast. He pointed his spiraly weapon at Manship from where he lay and



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began winding it. Once more, the Earthman went rigid with fright; he'd seen what that thing could do. To be killed now, after all he'd gone through . . .

And once more, there was a quiver and a mental scream of distress from the flefnobe: "The flat-eyed monster — I've found him — his eyes — his eyes. Zogt, Rabd, help! *His eyes* —"

There was nothing left but a twitching tentacle or two and a puddle of liquid rippling back and forth in a little hollow near the building wall. Without looking back, Manship fled.

A stream of red dots chattered over his shoulder and dissolved a domed roof directly ahead of him. Then he had turned the corner and was picking up speed. From the dwindling telepathic shouts behind him, he deduced with relief that feet moved faster than tentacles.

He found the correct colored streams and began to work his way in the direction of Rabd's spaceship. Only once or twice did he come across a flefnobe. And none of them seemed to be armed.

At sight of him, these passers-by wound their tentacles about their bodies, huddled against the nearest wall, and, after a few dismal mutters to the effect of "*Qrm* save me, *Qrm* save me," seemed to pass out.

HE WAS grateful for the absence of heavy traffic, but wondered why it should be so, especially since he was now moving through the residential quarters of the city according to the mental map he had purloined from Rabd.

Another overpowering roar in his mind gave him the answer.

"This is Pukr, the son of Kimp, returning to you with more news of the flat-eyed monster. First, the Council wishes me to notify all who have not already been informed through their *blelg* service that a state of martial law has been proclaimed in the city.

"Repeat: a state of martial law has been proclaimed in the city! All citizens are to stay off the streets until further notice. Units of the army and space fleet as well as heavy *maizeltoovers* are being moved in hurriedly. Don't get in their way! Stay off the streets!

"The flat-eyed monster has struck again. Just ten short *skims* ago, it struck down Lewv, the son of Yifg, in a running battle outside the College of Advanced *Turkaslerg*, almost trampling Rabd, the son of Glomg, who courageously hurled himself in its path in a valiant attempt to



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delay the monster's flight. Rabd, however, believes he seriously wounded it with a well-placed bolt from his blaster. The monster's weapon was the high-frequency beam from its eyes —

"Shortly before this battle, the flat-eyed horror from the outer galactic wastes had evidently wandered into a museum where it completely destroyed a valuable collection of green *fermfnaks*. They were found in a useless winged condition. Why did it do this? Pure viciousness? Some scientists believe that this act indicates intelligence of a very high order indeed, and that this intelligence, together with the fantastic powers already in evidence, will make the killing of the monster a much more difficult task than the local authorities expect.

"Professor Wuvb is one of these scientists. He feels that only through a correct psycho-sociological evaluation of the monster and an understanding of the peculiar cultural milieu from which it evidently derives will we be able to work out adequate counter-measures and save the planet. Therefore, in the interests of flefnobe survival, we have brought the professor here tonight to give you his views. The next mind you hear will be that of Professor Wuvb."

Just as the newcomer began portentously, "To understand any given cultural milieu, we must first ask ourselves what we mean by culture. Do we mean, for example —" Manship reached the landing field.

HE CAME out upon it near the corner on which Rabd's three-jet runabout was parked between an enormous interplanetary vessel being loaded with freight and what Manship would have been certain was a warehouse, if he hadn't learned so thoroughly how wrong he could be about flefnobe equivalents of human activities.

There seemed to be no guards about, the landing field was not particularly well-lit, and most of the individuals in the neighborhood were concentrated around the freighter.

He took a deep breath and ran for the comparatively tiny, spherical ship with the deep hollow in the top and bottom, something like an oversized metallic apple. He reached it, ran around the side until he came to the zigzag line that indicated an entrance and squeezed through.

As far as he could tell, he hadn't been observed. Outside of the mutter of loading and stowage instructions coming from the larger ship, there were only Pro-



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fessor Wuvb's louder thoughts weaving their intricate socio-philosophical web: ". . . So we may conclude that in this respect, at least, the flat-eyed monster does not show the typical basic personality pattern of an illiterate. But then, if we attempt to relate the characteristics of a preliterate urban cultural configuration . . ."

Manship waited for the doorway to contract, then made his way hand over hand up a narrow, twisting ladderlike affair to the control room of the vessel. He seated himself uncomfortably before the main instrument panel and went to work.

It was difficult using fingers on gadgets which had been designed for tentacles, but he had no choice. *"To warm up the motors of the* Bulvonn *Drive* —" Gently, very gently, he rotated the uppermost three cylinders a complete turn each. Then, when the rectangular plate to his left began to show an even succession of red and white stripes across its face, he pulled on the large black knob protruding from the floor. A yowling roar of jets started from outside. He worked almost without conscious effort, letting memory take over. It was as if Rabd himself were getting the spaceship into operation.

A few seconds later, he was off the planet and in deep space.

He switched to interstellar operation, set the directional indicator for astronomical unit 649-301-3 — and sat back. There was nothing else for him to do until the time came for landing. He was a little apprehensive about that part, but things had gone so well up to this point that he felt quite the interstellar daredevil. "Old Rocketfingers Manship," he grinned to himself smugly.

ACCORDING to Rabd's subliminal calculations, he should be arriving on Earth — given the maximum output of the *Bulvonn* Drive which he was using — in ten to twelve hours. He was going to be more than a bit hungry and thirsty, but — What a sensation he was going to make! Even more of a sensation than he had left behind him. The flat-eyed monster with a high-frequency mental beam coming out of its eyes. . .

What *had* that been? All that had happened to him, each time a flefnobe dissolved before his stare, was a good deal of fear. He had been terribly frightened that he was going to be blasted into tiny pieces and had, somewhere in the process of being frightened, evidently been able to throw out something pretty



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tremendous — to judge from results.

Possibly the abnormally high secretion of adrenalin in the human system at moments of stress was basically inimical to flefnobe body structure. Or maybe there was an entirely mental reaction in Man's brain at such times whose emanations caused the flefnobes to literally fall part. It made sense:

If he was so sensitive to their thoughts, they should be sensitive to him in some way. And obviously, when he was very much afraid, that sensitivity showed up with a vengeance.

He put his hands behind his head and glanced up to check his meters. Everything was working satisfactorily. The brown circles were expanding and contracting on the *sekkel* board, as Rabd's mind had said they should; the little serrations on the edge of the control panel were moving along at a uniform rate, the visiscreen showed — *the visiscreen!*

Manship leaped to his feet. The visiscreen showed what seemed to be every vessel in the flefnobe army and space fleet — not to mention the heavy *maizeltoovers* — in hot pursuit of him. And getting closer.

There was one large spacecraft that had almost caught up and was beginning to exude a series of bright rays that, Manship remembered from Rabd's recollections, were grapples.

What could have caused all this commotion — the theft of a single jet runabout? The fear that he might steal the secrets of flefnobe science? They should have been so glad to get rid of him, especially before he started reproducing hundreds of himself all over the planet!

And then a persistent thought ripple from inside his own ship — a thought ripple which he had been disregarding all the time he had been concentrating on the unfamiliar problems of deep-space navigation — gave him a clue.

He had taken off with someone — or something — else in the ship!

Clyde Manship scurried down the twisting ladder to the main cabin. As he approached, the thoughts became clearer and he realized, even before the cabin aperture dilated to let him through, exactly whom he would find.

Tekt.

The well-known female star of *fnesh* and *blelg* from the southern continent and Rabd's about-to-be bride cowered in a far corner; all of her tentacles — including the hundred and seventy-six slime-washed ones that were top-



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ped by limpid eyes — twisted about her tiny black body in the most complicated series of knots Manship had ever seen.

"Oo-ooh!" her mind moaned. *"Qrm! Qrm!* Now it's going to happen! That awful, horrible thing! It's going to happen to me! It's coming closer — closer —"

"Look, lady, I'm not even slightly interested in you," Manship began, before he remembered that he'd never been able to communicate with any flefnobe before, let alone a hysterical female one.

HE FELT the ship shudder as the grapples touched it. *Well, here I go again,* he thought. In a moment there would be boarders and he'd have to turn them into bluish soup.

Evidently, Tekt had been sleeping aboard the vessel when he took off. She'd been waiting for Rabd to return and begin their mating flight. And she was obviously a sufficiently important figure to have every last reserve called up.

His mind caught the sensation of someone entering the ship. Rabd. From what Manship could tell, he was alone, carrying his trusty blaster — and determined to die fighting.

Well, that's exactly what he'd have to do. Clyde Manship was a fairly considerate individual and heartily disliked the idea of disintegrating a bridegroom on what was to have been his honeymoon. But, since he had found no way of communicating his pacific intentions to these creatures, he had no choice.

"Tekt!" Rabd telepathed softly. "Are you all right?"

"Murder!" Tekt screamed. "Help-help-help-help . . ." Her thoughts abruptly disappeared; she had fainted.

The zig-zag aperture widened and Rabd bounced into the cabin, looking like a series of long balloons in his spacesuit. He glanced at the recumbent Tekt and then turned desperately, pointing his curlicued blaster at Manship.

"Poor guy," Manship was thinking. "Poor, dumb, narrow-minded hero type. In just a second, you'll be nothing but goo." He waited, full of confidence.

He was so full of confidence, in fact, that he wasn't a bit frightened.

So nothing came out of his eyes, nothing but a certain condescending sympathy.

So Rabd blasted the ugly, obscene, horrible, flat-eyed thing down where it stood. And scooped up his bride with loving tentacles. And went back home to a hero's reception.

—WILLIAM TENN



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# whiskaboom

***Jack's blunder was disastrous, but what he worried about was: would Einstein have approved?***

**By ALAN ARKIN**

DEAR Mr. Gretch:

Mrs. Burroughs and I are sending your son Jack to you because we do not know what else to do with him. As you can see, we can't keep him with us in his present condition.

Also, Jack owes us two weeks rent and, since Mrs. Burroughs and I are retired, we would appreciate your sending the money. It has been a dry year and our garden has done poorly.

The only reason we put up with your son in the first place was because we are so hard-pressed.

He saw the sign on the porch, rang the bell and paid Mrs. Burroughs a month's rent without even looking at the room. Then he ran out to his car and commenced pulling out suitcases and boxes and dragging them upstairs.

After the third trip, Mrs. Burroughs saw he was having trouble

**Illustrated by DIEHL**



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with the stuff and he looked kind of worn out, so she offered to help.

He gave her a hard look, as she described it to me when I got home. He said, "I don't want anyone touching anything. Please don't interfere."

"I didn't mean to interfere," my wife told him. "I only wanted to help."

"I don't want any help," he said quietly, but with a wild look in his eye, and he staggered upstairs with the last of his baggage and locked the door.

WHEN I got home, Mrs. Burroughs told me she thought I ought to take a look at the new boarder. I went up, thinking we'd have a little chat and straighten things out. I could hear him inside, hammering on something.

He didn't hear my first knock or the second. I got sore and nearly banged the door down, at which time he decided to open up.

I charged in, ready to fight a bear. And there was this skinny red-headed son of yours glaring at me.

"That's a lot of hammering you're doing, son," I said.

"That's the only way I can get these boxes open, and don't call me son."

"I don't like to disturb you, Mr. Gretch, but Mrs. Burroughs is a little upset over the way you acted today. I think you ought to come down for a cup of tea and get acquainted."

"I know I was rude," he said, looking a little ashamed, "but I have waited for years for a chance to get to work on my own, with no interference. I'll come down tomorrow, when I have got my equipment set up, and apologize to Mrs. Burroughs then."

I asked him what he was working on, but he said he would explain later. Before I got out of the door, he was hammering again. He worked till after midnight.

We saw Jack at mealtimes for the next few days, but he didn't talk much. We learned that he was twenty-six, in spite of his looking like a boy in his teens, that he thought Prof. Einstein the greatest man ever, and that he disliked being called son. Of his experiment, he didn't have much to say then. He saw Mrs. Burroughs was a little nervous about his experimenting in the guest room and he assured her it was not dangerous.

Before the week was out, we started hearing the noises. The first one was like a wire brush going around a barrel. It went *whisk, whisk*. Then he rigged up something that went *skaboom* every few seconds, like a loud heartbeat. Once in a while, he



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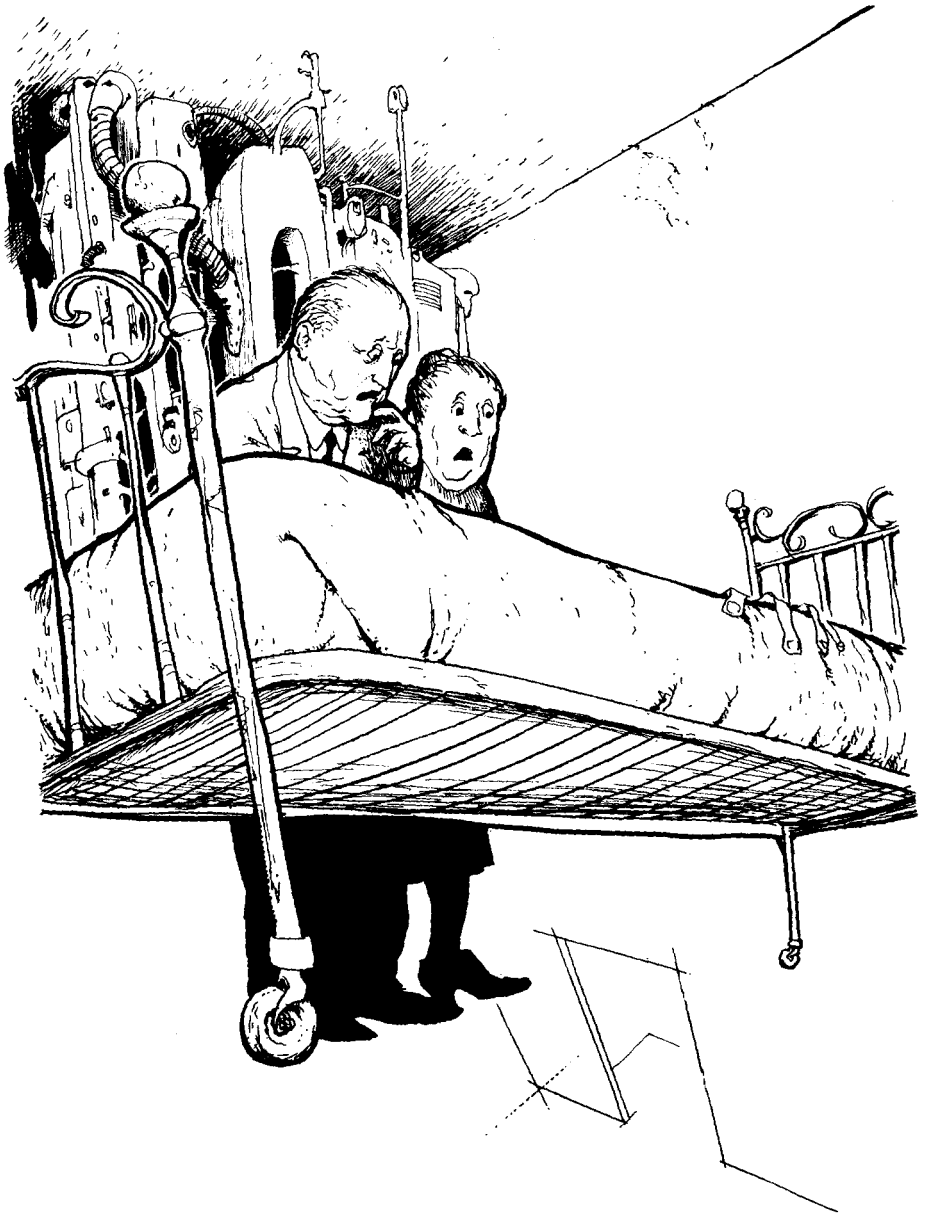



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got in a sound like a creaky well pump, but mostly it was *ska-boom,* and *whisk,* which eventually settled down to a steady rhythm, *whiskaboom, whiska-boom.*

It was kind of pleasant.

NEITHER of us saw him for two days. The noises kept going on. Mrs. Burroughs was alarmed because he did not answer her knock at mealtimes, and one morning she charged upstairs and hollered at him through the door.

"You stop your nonsense this minute and come down to breakfast!"

"I'm not hungry," he called back.

"You open this door!" she ordered and, by George, he did. "Your *whiskaboom* or whatever it is will keep till after breakfast."

He sat at the table, but he was a tired boy. He had a cold, his eyelids kept batting, and I don't believe he could have lifted his coffee cup. He tried to look awake, and then over he went with his face in the oatmeal.

Mrs. Burroughs ran for the ammonia, but he was out cold, so we wiped the oatmeal off his face and carried him upstairs.

My wife rubbed Jack's wrists with garlic and put wet towels on his face, and presently he came to. He looked wildly about the room at his machinery. It was all there, and strange-looking stuff, too.

"Please go away," he begged. "I've got work to do."

Mrs. Burroughs helped him blow his nose. "There'll be no work for you, sonny. Not until you're well. We'll take care of you." He didn't seem to mind being called sonny.

He was sick for a week and we tended him like one of our own. We got to know him pretty well. And we also got to know you.

Now, Mr. Gretch, whatever you are doing in your laboratory is your own business. You could be making atomic disintegrators, for all Jack told us. But he does not like or approve of it and he told us about your running battle with him to keep him working on your project instead of his own.

Jack tried to explain his ideas for harnessing time and what he called "the re-integration principle." It was all so much *whiska-boom* to us, so to speak, but he claimed it was for the good of mankind, which was fine with us.

But he said you would not let him work it out because there was less money in it than in your project, and this is why he had to get away and work and worry himself into a collapse.

When he got well, Mrs. Burroughs told him, "From now on,



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you're going to have three meals a day and eight hours sleep, and in between you can play on your *whiskaboom* all you please."

The *whiskabooming* became as familiar to us as our own voices.

Last Sunday, Mrs. Burroughs and I came home from church, about noon. She went inside through the front door to fix dinner. I walked around the house to look at the garden. And the moment I walked past the front of the house, I got the shock of my life.

The house disappeared!

I WAS too surprised to stop walking, and a step later I was standing at the back of the house, and it was all there. I took a step back and the whole house vanished again. One more step and I was at the front.

It looked like a real house in front and in back, but there wasn't any in-between. It was like one of those false-front saloons on a movie lot, but thinner.

I thought of my wife, who had gone into the kitchen and, for all I knew, was as thin as the house, and I went charging in the back door, yelling.

"Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right," she said. "What's the matter with you?"

I grabbed her and she was all there, thank heavens. She giggled and called me an old fool, but I dragged her outside and showed her what had happened to our house.

She saw it, too, so I knew I didn't have sunstroke, but she couldn't understand it any better than I.

Right about then, I detected a prominent absence of *whiskabooming*. "Jack!" I hollered, and we hurried back into the house and upstairs.

Well, Mr. Gretch, it was so pitiful, I can't describe it. He was there, but I never saw a more miserable human being. He was not only thin but also flat, like a cartoon of a man who had been steamrollered. He was lying on the bed, holding onto the covers, with no more substance to him than a thin piece of paper. Less.

Mrs. Burroughs took one of his shoulders between her thumb and forefinger, and I took the other, and we held him up. There was a breeze coming through the window and Jack — well, he waved in the breeze.

We closed the window and laid him down again and he tried to explain what had happened. "Professor Einstein wouldn't have liked this!" he moaned. "Something went wrong," he cried, shuddering.

He went on gasping and mumbling, and we gathered that he had hooked up a circuit the



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wrong way. "I didn't harness the fourth — I chopped off the third dimension! Einstein wouldn't have approved!"

He was relieved to learn that the damage had been confined to himself and the house, so far as we knew. Like the house, Jack had insides, but we don't know where they are. We poured tea down him, and he can eat, after a fashion, but there never is a sign of a lump anywhere.

THAT night, we pinned him to the bed with clothespins so he wouldn't blow off the bed. Next morning, we rigged a line and pinned him to it so he could sit up.

"I know what to do," he said, "but I would have to go back to the lab. Dad would have to let me have his staff and all sorts of equipment. And he won't do it."

"If he thinks more of his money than he does of his own son," Mrs. Burroughs said, "then he's an unnatural father."

But Jack made us promise not to get in touch with you.

Still, people are beginning to talk. The man from the electric company couldn't find the meter yesterday, because it is attached to the middle of the outside wall and has vanished.

Mr. Gretch, we are parents and we feel that you will not hesitate a moment to do whatever is necessary to get Jack back into shape. So, despite our promise, we are sending Jack to you by registered parcel post, air mail. He doesn't mind the cardboard mailing tube he is rolled up in as he has been sleeping in it, finding it more comfortable than being pinned to the sheets.

Jack is a fine boy, sir, and we hope to hear soon that he is back to normal and doing the work he wants to do.

Very truly yours,
W. Burroughs

P.S. When Jack figures out the re-integration principle, we would appreciate his fixing our house. We get along as usual, but it makes us nervous to live in a house that, strictly speaking, has no insides. W.B.

—ALAN ARKIN

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We're understandably proud of the fact that our subscribers get their copies of Galaxy at least a week before the newsstands do . . . but we can't maintain that enviable record unless, if you're moving, we get your old and new address promptly! It takes time to change our records, you know, so send in the data as soon as you have it!



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# Country Estate

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

***No galactic job was more ugly than breaking the spirits of happy primitives . . . and this was the happiest race Man had ever reached!***

Illustrated by DOCKTOR

FROM the beginning, the primitives were a paradox. We found them living as aborigines, without shelter or clothing. They hadn't developed even a rudimentary language. Yet they were not without considerable dignity.

They were a clean race with sharp, searching eyes. Nevertheless, a few simple games and an intriguing group dance which they performed with fanatic fervor were the extent of their social achievement.

They had the tractability of



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animals. Yet the haughty tilt of their heads suggested their compliance would never degenerate into servility. I even sensed an indifference to the miracle of our arrival.

Numbering more than a hundred, they were expectantly silent as they stood in the shadow of the ship, monitoring Sharp's moves with alertly curious and unawed eyes.

Sunlight glinted on metal as he elevated the flagstaff and brought it stabbing down into the ground.

"As commander of this expedition," he proclaimed, "I claim this planet in the name of the Federated Worlds."

The declaration was a formality. Later, after the primitives learned the Universal tongue, they would ultimately grasp its implications.

Sharp rubbed a stiff finger pensively along his cheek and turned toward me. "So they have no articulate status, Norton?"

"No, sir."

He frowned. "What do you make of it, Ron? Can a race look as intelligent as these do and still not have a language?"

I shrugged. "It's possible. Environment here is close to perfect — no adverse factors, no defensive instincts necessary. And language, basically, is a survival device."

HANDS clasped behind his back, he paced in front of the assembled natives, pausing to scrutinize first an elderly woman, then the child who stood next to her.

Abruptly, he turned to face the formation of ship's personnel.

"Hallman! Block off the area with neuro-repellent pickets. I'll hold you responsible for the loss of any of these primitives.

"Walker! Synthesize some clothing — halters and skirts for the women, loincloths for the men. That scrub over there looks as if it might do." He flicked his hand toward a stand of dwarf trees.

"Jenkins! Draw up a work schedule. I'll expect you to get the most out of them at all times."

Hallman hurried off to charge the neurowave generators.

Walker motioned to his crew and they followed him, lugging portable lab equipment over to the clump of miniature trees.

Jenkins led his Herdsmen — the name they had earned in the Corps — back into the ship.

Sharp continued on down the line of primitives, facing each with critical glances. He drew up in front of a young girl who fixed him with a stare as analytical as his own.

She was tall and smoothly tanned, with blonde hair that bil-



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lowed like a surf against her shoulders. Her eyes were clear and vibrant, the slim lines of her body supple, yet strong without being muscular. Her face, despite its sharp lines and taut skin, was vital and beautiful.

"She'll do for a linguistic aptitude test, Norton. Do what you can with her."

Solicitously, I took her by the arm and led her from the line. She came lithely and without resisting, an uncertain smile showing bewilderment, not a need for reassurance.

Sharp backed off and surveyed the natives caustically.

"Animals," he muttered. "Simple animals. They've never had anything to fight, no challenge to make them function as a social unit . . . therefore, no social development. But that should be to our advantage, shouldn't it? If they're like animals, they ought to respond to training like animals."

He hooked his thumbs under his belt and laughed. "But they'll be a credit to the Federation — after we teach them industry. They'll hate work, but they'll beg for it."

"Because," I agreed wearily, "it'll bring them the useless things they'll learn to want."

But his thoughts were unbroken as he drummed a finger on his chin and glanced at me. "I wonder if they can grasp the concept of conflict."

Before I could answer, he rocked forward toward a husky youth and his hand lashed out, palm and knuckles stinging both cheeks in an alternate swing and backswing.

Puzzled, the youth retreated, staring uncertainly at those around him.

Sharp's hand fell away from his sidearm. "Now that they know this isn't going to be a party, we'll divide them into primary indoctrination groups, so we can get an early start tomorrow."

A MAILED-FIST approach works admirably nine out of ten times on first contact with races of Class C intelligence and under — the Handbook says.

The factors are simple: If you're benign, they'll be resentful when the delusion wears off and they learn of their responsibilities. On the other hand, if you show invincible might, they'll be even more tractable when they realize their lot isn't going to be enslavement but eventual equality — of a purely commercial sort, of course.

The Handbook was Sharp's creed. If you made allowance for that — plus the not too conspicuous fact that he was bucking for



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the post of regional coordinator—then he really wasn't such a bad character, as expedition commanders go.

To the unhardened crew member, slapping the native may have seemed malicious. It wasn't really. It was the mailed-fist technique. I was familiar enough with Sharp to know there was nothing personal. Linguistic technicians, being second in command because they also serve as liaison between natives and crew, enjoy a somewhat closer relationship with skippers.

I was considering the consequences of the mailed-fist philosophy when Sharp came up and offered a cigarette. His face was grim and set even in the placid hues of sunset.

Silently we smoked, while we watched the Herdsmen tagging the natives radiologically into four work groups. They finished with the last one and retired to the ship. The primitives disappeared into the woods.

"The girl?" Sharp asked.

"She's still under hypno from the first session."

"When will she be able to talk?"

"Hard to say. A week — ten days. I've only handled articulates until now. I don't know what the results will be with this batch."

"How are you going about it?"

"Double semacascade unit on slow transfer with all the trimmings — hypnotic assimilation included. That way, the concepts and word symbols go directly into her subconscious. She doesn't have to face the confusion of conscious learning."

SHARP aimed his cigarette at a tree trunk. Sparks showered vividly in the twilight gloom. "Let me know when you've cascaded the full twenty-four-hundred-word basic. We may find their inarticulate status helpful to quick assimilation — don't you suppose?"

"A possibility," I admitted. "At least they won't have to struggle through the confusion of bilingual coordination."

A linguistic lab assistant led the girl from the ship. She stood looking at us momentarily, smiled and gracefully moved toward the woods. She was almost a silhouette against the pastels of faded sunset. But her pale features stood out as though in a light of their own. A flash of white and then she was engulfed by the darkness of the trees.

For a long while, I stared after her. She and her people were lean and handsome, with the supple limbs of swimmers or trackmen. Strength and agility were



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apparent in every motion of their bodies. But it didn't seem like the raw vigor of the primitive. Somehow they carried a suggestion of nobility.

How would they be after civilization came? I had seen it happen so many times — the transitory degradation, the squalid living conditions, the collective uncertainty and frustration — centuries before they would learn to live with civilization.

"Something on your mind, Norton?" Sharp asked suddenly.

"Just this assignment — these people. Know what the men are calling them? Meekheads."

"You're trying to say something. Go on, say it."

"Maybe the mailed-fist doesn't have to be applied."

He smiled, shaking his head. "Long ago, I tried that magnanimous idea myself. About the second or third expedition. I got my ears pinned back with an uprising that I couldn't begin to handle. I learned. You won't catch Sharp having to call for the Bully Crew again."

THE DUTIES and responsibilities of the Corps are severe by any standards. Following in the wake of a Primary Discovery crew, we descend upon a planet, gather a test group, administer a precursory indoctrination in Federation civilization, then report on our success or failure. If the report is favorable, we turn the planet over to a Comprehensive Team which guides the expansion of the society in all phases from school system to technology.

Our work is exacting. We are constantly under pressure of a deadline, for there's no end to the planets that have to be tested and integrated. So we are always gratified to discover a previously overlooked aspect of primitive life — especially if it might make our job easier, less ruthless and more successful.

That was why we were interested in the dance, which we witnessed on our first night.

Walker and I were accompanying the skipper on security inspection outside the ship. The chemist was describing the primitives' reaction to the issuance of clothing when we were attracted by a pale, glimmering light filtering through the trees.

Sharp saw it first and pointed. "What do you make of that?"

"Maybe Primary was wrong," Walker suggested. "Maybe they *do* have fire."

"Then we'll have to revise our appraisal." Sharp surged ahead, smiling enthusiastically. "That'll mean indoctrination in less time than we'd alloted."



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Farther into the thicket, the light became brighter, rivaling even the brilliance of the two moons and their shimmering reflections against distant snow-topped peaks.

Trying to push through a dense undergrowth, Sharp swore softly and jerked his arm back.

"Damned thorns—like spikes!" He sucked on the back of his hand.

A soft strain of melody rose from the other side of the brush, in the area of the trembling light.

The subdued euphony increased in volume, like the swell of a restless sea — a hundred native voices in inarticulate harmony, some murmuring huskily, others humming shrilly. The wordless song was all idyllic simplicity and sentiment. It was the pouring forth of the soul of a people.

"God!" whispered Walker. "Ever hear anything like it?"

Sharp grunted and moved on along the hedgelike bush to a spot where the growth was thinner. We drew up alongside him, staring into the clearing.

THE NATIVES were there — some twenty or thirty in the center, surrounded by the others who sat in a circle. And the light — the shimmering glow that was like Earthbound starlight — was coming from *the bodies of the small group!*

It was an eerie blue-green aura that coruscated over their flesh like the phosphorescent glimmerings in a ship's wake.

Sharp grasped Walker's arm. "Did Primary say anything about *firefly natives?*" he whispered incredulously.

"There's nothing in the report," the chemist assured him.

"I'll want a complete explanation. Take one of them back to the ship for observation. Put your best biochemist on it."

Gradually, while Sharp spoke, the wordless song had changed theme. To me, it was now a lilting strain that dwelled on concepts of aspiration and yearning — the birth of resolution, the dawn of humility. And from the depths of the voices came a subtle undertone of pride.

Then the dance began.

Pressed tightly together, the small group slumped into an amorphous cluster, the phosphorescent sheen of their bodies disappearing. The murmured melody crescendoed while a single arm elevated and undulated, lambent light playing across its flesh like a cold fire. Other arms thrust up and joined in the wavering motion, like reeds swaying before a marsh breeze.

Faster now came the tempo of



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the music. Arms were elevated still higher and ghostily glimmering bodies rose fluctuating beneath them. The strain ended on a note of tentative triumph as the biological light flared brilliantly . . . and was extinguished.

But the humming resumed and the dancers, joined by others, regrouped in three formations.

Sharp touched my shoulder. "Look. They've formed a square, a triangle and a circle. A sub-social group with no language, but with the knowledge of geometric symbols. Does that make sense?"

"It's possible. Symbols are taken from nature — the shape of their moons, the four pedal points of a quadruped, the outline of a mountain."

Fascinated by the new phase of the dance, we watched the natives in wild, erratic motion, their heads snapping rhythmically from side to side, their arms pistoning in and out, their bodies whirling in discontinuous gyrations, each in turn duplicating the motion of the next one. It was a precise but discordant movement. It ended quickly, however, and the wraithlike spectacle passed on to still another phase.

Now a tall native stood with arms folded and glowing steadily. A score of men and women circled about him, pirouetting around each other in pairs.

The background humming crested with excited fervor and the dancers whirled recklessly, their flesh only faintly luminous compared with that of the motionless man.

"Ron," Sharp whispered eagerly. "This proves they're more communal than we thought. We might not have such a tough job ahead, after all."

A YOUNG girl, still whirling, glided away from her partner in an arc that swept her to the next nearest pair of circling dancers. The music became more excited now. Drawn as though into a vortex of exultation, another group formed at the other end of the field, spinning in mercurial steps about a second central figure.

The swirling motion was a thing of grace and beauty that could be described only in the dance that was being performed by primitives who had no language.

The girl again swept out of position and, glowing even more brightly, caracoled across the clearing to become part of the second group. More spectators joined the gyrating formations. Others created new wheeling groups until there was none left to watch.

Sharp swore abruptly and



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reached down to the ground. He came up waving a handful of garments. We realized only then that the natives had cast off their synthetic clothing.

Sharp's expression grew harsh —the letter of the Handbook had been violated. The natives had been issued clothes and shown how to wear them, but they were not wearing them now. That was sheer disobedience.

Shouting angrily, he charged into the clearing.

The dancers froze in position. Their inarticulate tones drifted into silence. Their luminosity flickered, faded and disappeared, leaving the glade a dismal moor, illuminated only by the pitifully weak light of the moons. It was as though a beautiful symphony had been silenced in mid-theme.

Sharp unholstered his duo-purpose revolver and flicked it on minimum output. Then he swept the closest group of dancers with its neuro-agitant impulses.

He hurled the garments into the air and they fluttered down, falling across the bare flesh of the dancers.

"Get them on!" he ordered, fanning the weapon back over the cringing primitives and then thrusting it into his holster.

A small boy broke and raced blindly into the underbrush. I waited for the screams that would come as thorns tore into his flesh.

Meekly — or was it with an imperceptible air of patience? — the primitives began putting on their clothes.

Sharp returned to where we were standing. "Glad they stepped out of line," he explained. "The book says not to pass up



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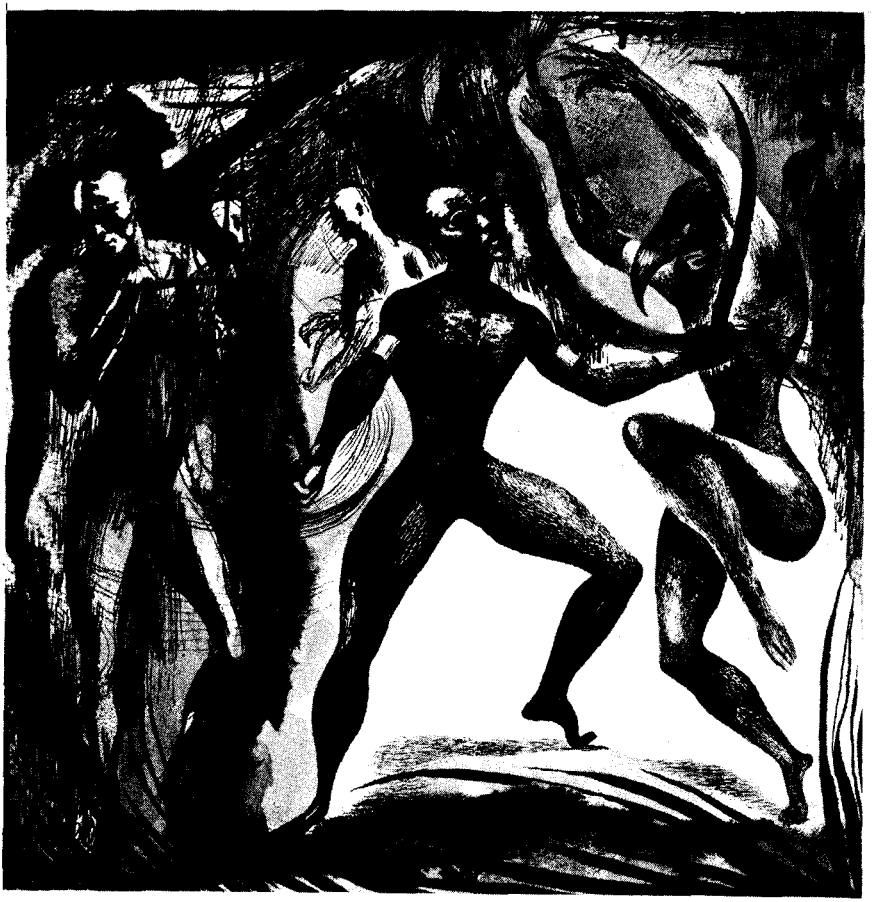

any opportunity to show authority. Walker, pick one out for your bio test."

Then he started back for the ship.

I went looking for the boy who had plunged into the thorny underbrush.

I found him pressed against a tree. He didn't shrink away, as I expected him to, when I knelt to examine his wounds.

There weren't any.

THE SEMACASCADE units hummed restlessly in the lab as I stood by the port and watched the natives working at



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the edge of the woods.

An hour earlier, they had been shown a finished dwelling, constructed of logs hewn and notched with nucleonic cutters and lifted into place with counter-gravitic cranes. Now, coached by Herdsmen and equipped with the primitive tools they would be expected to use for two generations, the four groups were attempting to duplicate the construction.

The girl — we called her Lola for the record — stirred as the psychocascade pulsator changed pitch, moving on to another concept. I went over and readjusted the dipoles. Even in induced sleep, with her face relaxed and the color drained away, her beauty was like a vivid mask. But it was a helpless elegance that only seemed typical of the humility of her race — a new type of subdued charm unlike any I'd seen in any race, Class A through D inclusive.

For a long while, I stared down at her delicate yet vigorous features, thinking thoughts forbidden by the Handbook — how it would be to shake free of an expedition and spend a lifetime with a nymph.

Walker came in, frowning. "How's Lola doing?"

"Soaked up everything so far. Reaction about normal for a Class C. How did the glow-worm biopsy go?"

He shrugged wearily. "Can't find anything to account for it. No dermato-trachael system. No oxygen supply for any sort of biocumbustion. No photogenic organs. Only normal human tissue."

"Don't let it heave you," I encouraged. "Maybe it's something we only imagined."

His frown only deepened. "Like that kid running into the thicket last night? Ron, the boy *did* tear through those thorns."

I laughed. "Without getting scratched?"

He nodded seriously. "When I performed the biopsy, I took the specimen from the native's shoulder. I severed the tissue. I dropped it into solution. Not more than three seconds later, I was back to sterilize the wound . . . It had already healed."

SHARP LISTENED impatiently in his cabin as I told of the biopsy and the boy in the thicket. Then, annoyed, he shrugged it off.

"Regeneration — simple regeneration. We've run across it before. There was that time on Auxol —"

"Not quite. This regeneration was in seconds, not days."

He stared thoughtfully out the port, then turned back to me.



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"Look, Ron. I'm not interested in physiological aberrations as long as they don't disqualify a race as humanoid. In this body-glow matter and regeneration — Walker hasn't found anything to suggest the Meekheads are subhuman?"

I shook my head.

"Then the official report will do for whatever comments you or he might have on the phenomena. Meanwhile, I'm more concerned over this."

He motioned through the port toward the working natives. There were confused expressions on their faces as they tried to lay base logs in place for the dwellings.

"They are disappointingly inept for a race that is aware of geometrical patterns in their dance ritual," he complained. "Does that suggest anything?" But he went on without waiting for a reply. "It's obvious we have a conspiracy on our hands. They are capable of what we require, but they're being obstinate."

"How can they conspire on anything without even a sign language?" I asked.

"We'll learn that only after we have the girl ready for her first interview. Then, perhaps, we'll know why they glow like fireflies and heal their wounds immediately."

"The explanation might lie in concepts we can't grasp. How can they express those concepts in words we can understand, if we can't give them a language with those words and concepts already embodied in it?"

He brushed aside the argument. "All the same, we will prepare for immediate linguistic contact. Have the girl ready for questioning in the morning."

"But we can't speed it up that much without risking mental instability. Even top-grade Class Bs need at least a week for language indoctrination."

His features tightened stubbornly. "Interview in the morning. Early."

"But —"

"I'll worry about the complications, if there are any. The interview is an order, Ron."

After all, there *was* the Handbook and he *was* bucking for promotion. Besides, he could stick anybody aboard with a summary charge of insubordination. And I *did* have my own future in the Corps to think about.

As I turned to leave, a Herdsman supervisor clicked his heels in the doorway and saluted. "Sir, Lieutenant Hallman reports that the natives don't eat."

"Tell the Lieutenant that if they don't like our chow," said Sharp, "let them grub for their own — between work periods."



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"You don't understand, Captain. It isn't that they *won't* eat. They *don't* eat — at all."

"Nonsense!"

"We've just completed our third inspection of the area, sir. From what we can see, the Meekheads never touch any food."

SOLICITOUSLY, I studied Lola as she lay beneath the cascade units, wondering whether she was aware of her helplessness and my inability to justify her confidence.

My hand started toward the units to make the adjustments Sharp had ordered. But I drew them back hesitantly. Then I tried to capture the spirit of the Handbook, telling myself she was only one of a species; that if something went wrong with the language transplant experiment, there were still ninety-nine other subjects in the test area — millions outside the area.

But all I could see was her hair flared out on the cold metal of the table like solar prominences against the velvet of space; her smile that had expressed her simple faith in me more meaningfully than it could ever be conveyed in words.

Reluctantly, I increased the intensity of hypno-anesthetic and put the psychocascade units on three-quarters-maximum output, direct transfer. Sharp would never know I hadn't used full power. And the only inconvenience to us would be a less than standard vocabulary, but one that would still do for an initial interview.

Later, when night came, I wandered to the clearing, hoping to find the primitives again at their ritual. I wasn't disappointed.

Concealed behind a tree, I stared wonderingly at the magnificent spectacle of glimmering, whirling bodies, lost in the enigma of their ceremony. Only, this time, drab synthetic clothing concealed the full grace of their movements. And, as I watched, I wondered what the Federation's most renowned choreographers would give just to witness the sight.

Again the small group lay in a featureless mass with an occasional arm extending upward, wavering.

Was it a symbolic ritual? An alternate social manifestation that supplanted a civilization which had never developed? Was it their legend and history, mores and folklore — all embodied in an exotic dance that replaced a language? If properly translated, would it resolve all the riddles?

More confused than fascinated, I watched the primitives execute the erratic movements of snapping heads and pistoning



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arms. And the music became even more soulful in transition to the next phase, while lithe bodies lost themselves in an ecstasy of concentric circles around central figures.

Now the ritual was at the stage where it had been interrupted by Sharp. But it moved on into yet another phase. The groups dispersed in flitting motion and the performers took up individual positions, spangling the glade with islands of pale light.

The humming deepened toward a feverish pitch and movement resumed. The natives pirouetted, caracoled, swayed, tripped across the field, while the halos of their bodies flickered steadily.

They performed with an air of abandon, as though they realized that soon the ecstasy of their dance would be lost forever. And, for a brief instant, I could almost grasp an elusive meaning that might be concealed in their ritual.

Suddenly one of the girls swept close by, an elegant flash of swift limbs and scintillating light. She paused to begin a pirouette and our eyes met.

Was it *Lola?*

But it couldn't be! Even if she had overcome the hypo-anesthesia, she would still have the capacitance-activated hatches to cope with before she could leave the ship.

I scanned the field, trying to catch sight of her again. But she was gone — swallowed up in the maelstrom of dancers.

Hurrying back to the ship, I found her as I had left her.

IMPATIENTLY, I swung aside the cascade units and moved the table away from the port so Lola's face wouldn't be in the direct sunlight. Then I waited for her to awaken, wondering apprehensively whether the overwhelming surge of alien concepts and word symbols had destroyed an intelligence that might have been as gentle and beautiful as the form which cloaked it.

But when she finally opened her eyes, the brightness of rationality was still there.

"You are Lola," I said.

"But why am I here?" There was a softness in her voice that I hadn't heard on a score of test planets — on a hundred civilized worlds.

"You are going to speak for your people, until we can teach them to speak, too."

Her face twisted in confusion. "What is there to say?"

"Through speaking, you will learn how to live better and be happy." It was the routine approach — Article Two, Section Seven, of the Handbook.

"We are happy now."



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"But you'll be happier. We're from the stars. And your children's children will reach the stars, too."

She rose and stood trembling by the table. "You must go back without us."

I grasped her shoulders and stared into the beauty of her eyes. And I found myself struggling with thoughts the Handbook says should be alien to any good Corpsman.

"How do you know we can be civilized?" she asked.

Sharp appeared smiling in the doorway, his thumbs hung up on his belt. "She can make sense?"

I nodded as he strode over and stood before her. The mailed fist again? I wondered, tensing.

"Do you people have a language?" he demanded.

"We do not speak."

"But you *can* talk," he insisted. "You're only pretending you can't, aren't you?"

"Pretending?" she repeated.

"The word's not basic," I reminded him.

"Neither is the word 'civilization,' which she seemed to be doing all right with when I came in."

I stared awkwardly at him, then at her.

"Lola," he continued warily, "your people are simple. They can't even talk. Yet they know all about a square, a circle, a triangle. How do you account for that?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you know how to work together?" he pressed.

"There is no need."

"Or did you decide you *wouldn't* work — that you'd pretend to be stupid so we'd think you *couldn't* learn to work?"

"We are slow because the work is hard. We have never built homes before."

I interrupted. "You're getting into concepts she can't grasp with just a basic cascade treatment."

"The hell I am! She's hedging, Ron! Yesterday she was out of the ship just once — when the others were taking a break. Yet she's aware they're being taught to build shacks. How else would she know unless they communicate?"

He grasped her wrist. "What are you trying to make us believe?"

She glanced helplessly at me. I started to step in between them.

"Stay out, Norton," Sharp warned.

A Herdsman sergeant stomped in, saluted. "Lieutenant Walker wants to know if you'll come to the lab right away, sir."

"What now?" Sharp asked, annoyed.

"We found out why they don't



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have to wear clothes. The Lieutenant says they're thermostatic. They can adjust to cold or heat."

Sharp's arms flopped down. "Damn!" he muttered, striding for the hatch.

In the corridor, he glanced back. "Lock that woman up, Sergeant, until I can get back to her."

Somehow I felt Lola might not stay locked up very long.

THE SEMACASCADE banks had to be bled and recharged, so it wasn't until late afternoon before I could get away from the lab.

Outside, I watched from a distance as Sharp personally supervised the primitives' instructions in tree-felling and notching. But they couldn't seem to grasp the principle of fitting one log on top of the other.

I rehearsed an argument for Lola's release — one that I felt would be convincing — and waited for a chance to spring it.

Sharp was a fury of bellowing words as he shouted instructions to the Herdsmen and contempt for the natives. I watched him snatch an ax from one of the primitives and swing it savagely at the trunk of a sapling. Swearing, he thrust it back into the man's hand. The native only continued to wield the tool ineffectively, the broadside of its blade clanking against bark.

"Jenkins!" Sharp shouted abruptly. "Take a two-hour break and reorganize into shifts. We're going on a twenty-four-hour schedule."

Swabbing his brow, he came over and held out a cigarette, shaking his head disparagingly. "I've *never* run into this much trouble."

"About Lola —" I began.

He thrust a lighter under my cigarette and then lit his own. "I'm ordering a trouble-shooting detail from Regional Command. Microbiologists, organic chemists, psychologists, medical technicians — a full complement. We'll find out more about these damned Meekheads than we know about ourselves!"

He probably had visions of his promotion to regional coordinator flying out of orbit.

"John," I said, "these natives are — well, different. Maybe another approach —"

"Like turning the girl loose," he broke in sarcastically, "and patting her on the rump and asking her family in to sit at the captain's table?"

"If you'd quit quoting the Handbook for a minute —"

"This is *my* ship," he returned severely, "and I want it taut. So taut that whenever I find a subordinate going moon-happy over



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a native woman —"

He stopped short and let out a rush of air like a ship blowing its tubes. "Oh, hell, Ron. You're a good linguistic technician. Don't complicate things."

"I can't see putting a girl in irons because Article Three says to watch out for conspiracy."

He sighed. "You don't like the Corps, do you?"

"I don't like the way it's run sometimes."

Even before I said it, I realized I had needled him too far.

He hurled his cigarette to the ground and crushed it. "Well, you can walk out and go native any time — now, if you want!"

He strode angrily toward the ship and my eyes followed him as my thoughts stalled on his last words. And I wondered how many desertions from the Corps were prompted by Handbook-conscious skippers, how many by Galaxy-hopping fatigue . . . how many by girls like Lola.

IN THE dusk, the natives stood around the half-built cabin, staring uncertainly after the Herdsmen who were withdrawing into the ship.

Studying the people, I realized they didn't look like persons who had been driven almost to exhaustion for ten hours. Their bodies were unbent, their faces alert and fresh, and their movements brisk as they sifted into the thicket . . . to another dance ritual?

Stars came out glittering and brilliant against the soft curtain of night, like . . . *like the final phase of the primitives' dance!* I made the association spontaneously, as though I had subconsciously realized it all the while.

At the beginning of that final movement, they had spaced themselves randomly about the field, their luminescence trembling in intensity like the shimmerings of a myriad stars.

Was this part of the symbolism? Was I beginning to grasp the significance of the ritual?

I pushed quickly through the woods to the clearing. The dance was already under way and, intently, I watched the formless mass of bodies writhing, wavering, striving to stand erect, swaying rhythmically.

It was like — like . . . I couldn't force the association. I listened to the strains of hummed music for a possible clue. But still I was seeing only an incomprehensible group dance.

The pace quickened and the primitives swirled into rigid positions, their bodies moving in the precise rhythm of the second, the mechanical phase. Then I noticed they had discarded their clothes.



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There was movement in the bush on my right and Lola emerged, running lithely toward the clearing! She passed close and I grabbed her arm.

"How did you get out of the ship?" I snapped.

Moonlight splashed across her face and, for the first time, there was anxiety in her features.

"Let me go!" she pleaded. "It will be our *last dance!*"

Perplexed, I stared down at her. How had she learned about the twenty-four-hour work schedule?

"We are going away," she explained.

My hand closed suddenly on nothing, where before it had held her wrist. And she was among the dancers. She took her place in a concentric circle whirling about one of the glowing pivot men.

Their humming voices, the fierce abandon, were soul-stirring and vividly alive.

Entranced, I stood swaying at the edge of the clearing, wanting to race out and join them, eager to experience their exultation.

Lola glided from her circle and tripped across the clearing to take up a new whirling position with another group. Two natives from that group flitted to the formation she had left.

Suddenly there was a burst of realization as the pattern resolved into meaningful terms. Now I knew! The dance and its phases were —

"Lola!" I cried, remembering she had said they were going away. "Don't leave!"

Sickened with a sense of impending loss, I strained to catch sight of her. They *couldn't* leave now — not after we'd just found them!

Finally I saw her, a lovely wraith, all shimmering and beautiful as she danced the dance of a hundred eras. I lunged out after her.

"Steady, Norton. Stand back."

I stopped and turned around, riveted by the threat in Sharp's voice. Cold moonlight shivered along the metal barrel of the gun he held.

"I COULD overlook our differences of opinion," he said calmly, scanning the formations of dancers. "But freeing the girl, standing by and letting these primitives run around nude . . . Where is she?"

"You don't understand. These natives —"

"Save it for the court-martial. Meanwhile, you'll confine yourself to quarters under arrest." He motioned me to one side and leveled the gun into the clearing.

Punishment — the whiplash of



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neuro-agitant impulses — was sufficient for a first offense, the Handbook directed. For a repeated offense, such as flagrant nudity, an exemplary execution was mandatory.

He flicked the weapon's selector to maximum output and a nimbus of vicious, visible force leaped out to engulf the nearest native. Radiant energy supplemented the effect of body illumination until a dazzling light flared briefly, like the bursting of a nova.

When the fierce glow subsided, however, there was no limp body quivering in the final agonies of a death that had destroyed the nervous system.

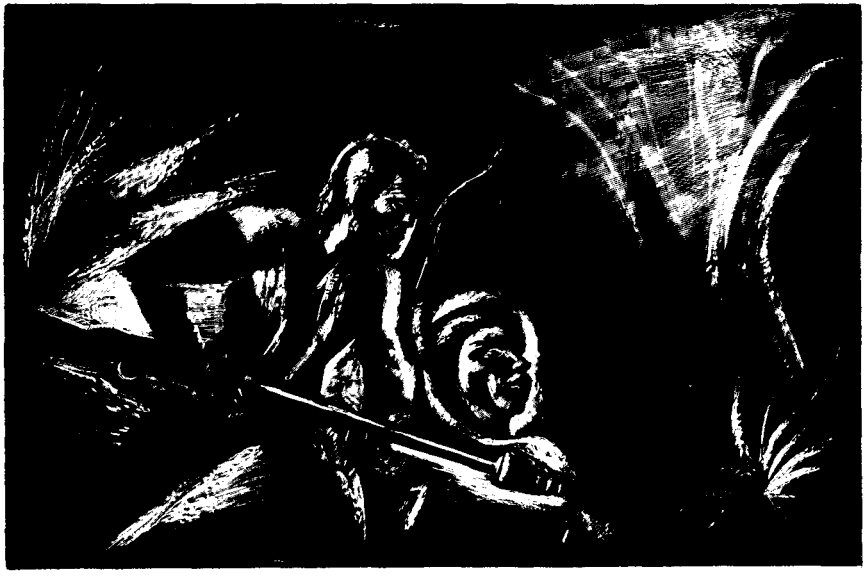
The native had simply disappeared.

And the dance continued as though the performers hadn't noticed the incident.

The gun dangling from his hand, Sharp backed away incredulously. He brought the weapon up again and its soft fury of pale light flicked out once more, this time directed at two of the primitives.

I struggled with the impression that the pair had disappeared the barest instant before he fired.

Sharp swore.





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And the dance went on, reaching its climax. The primitives dispersed about the field, filling the glade with the weird lambent illumination of their bodies.

I remembered Lola, desperately shouted her name, lunged again into the clearing.

The thin cone of deadly neuro-impulses flared like a barrier inches in front of me, aimed at the natives on the far right. Then the beam was sweeping slowly, determinedly, across the glade.

Like candles being extinguished with the wave of a hand, the primitives disappeared in turn as the spotlight of death passed over them.

Then they were all gone and Sharp was shouting to himself. He let the gun fall to the ground and dropped down beside it, his face in his hands. I felt sorry for him. *He* didn't understand.

When he looked up, the harshness was back on his face. "They won't get far! Not with the neuro-picket fence up."

"Have you a fence around the Galaxy?" I asked, suddenly bitter.

He stared bewilderedly.

"They won't be back," I went on dully. "They were considering leaving all the while. They pulled out when they saw we meant to break down their ruse and bring them the gift of civilization."

IT WAS lonely in the clearing with the natives gone. There was only the hollow memory of their dance, the ringing strains of their melody in every rustling leaf. I knew it was a desolation that extended all over the planet.

"You *know* where they went?" he asked incredulously.

I turned vengefully on him. But resentment gave way to pity and I looked away. He could never understand. The factors were too far removed from handbooks and creeds and taut ships and the politics of the Corps. Forlornly, I closed my eyes and pic-



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tured Lola's face — a face I would never see again.

"Where are they, Ron?" he demanded.

"A light-year away — ten — a thousand. Maybe in another galaxy."

He swore impatiently.

"*We* were trying to judge *their* intelligence." I couldn't control the irony in my voice. "That was like a moron trying to appraise the intelligence of a genius . . . John, *we* are the primitives! We're like a wild dog who finds himself on the grounds of a peaceful country estate. Instead of letting himself be taken in and having it easy for the rest of his life, he stays vicious and gets kicked back into the forest. God, what we might have learned from them!"

"From those *savages?*"

"They were savages, all right — fifty million years ago maybe. Think of their dance. Could you see anything in it?"

"Just a primitive ritual."

"It was a total record of racial achievement, passed down from generation to generation — a ceremonial tribute to a glorious heritage."

"Heritage! In a race that hasn't even learned to build a fire?"

"Their discovery of fire," I explained patiently, "was commemorated in the first phase of the dance — wavering luminous arms and bodies rising like flames from a formless heap. It symbolized the beginning of culture. The erratic gestures of the second movement — I could see spinning gears, thrusting rods, sliding pistons . . . a tribute to a transitory mechanical civilization.

"And dancers whirling in circles around their luminous pivot men? Planets in orbits around suns. Natives gliding from one circling position — from one orbit — to another. A commemoration of the conquest of interplanetary space."

Comprehension was spreading across his face. "And when they were scattering around the field with their bodies glowing on and off —"

"Twinkling stars. And natives darting from one dancer to another to signify the achievement of galactic travel."

"*But where is their civilization?*"

I TURNED to stare morosely into the clearing. She had danced there only minutes ago. The loneliness now made it seem like an eternity.

"What *is* civilization?" I asked. "Simply a stage in racial evolution. From our viewpoint, because we are immediately involved in the process, civilization



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seems an end in itself. We're proud of the artifacts we've perfected. But when we evolve to the point where we can turn body heat on and off like a switch, why waste time tailoring clothes and building homes? And would it not be pointless to take medicines and maintain therapeutic institutions if we had already developed spontaneous regeneration?

"Would we bother with producing food, if we had evolved a biological way of extracting energy for metabolism from some source we can't even conceive of now? Nor would we need interstellar and interplanetary ships — or any kind of vehicle — if we could go anywhere simply by *willing* ourselves there. Even language is superfluous when there's the ability to transfer concepts directly from mind to mind. And any planet they pick is not a world to be conquered. It's a country estate."

Sharp broke his thoughtful silence with a start. "Ron, we've got to find them! Think what the contact would mean to the advancement of galactic civilization! This can't be the only planet they were on. When they left civilization behind, they must have scattered. We'll hunt them down, if we have to search the Galaxy system by system!"

*And you'll still not find us.* The words seemed like my own — unspoken.

Sharp gasped and I knew he had heard the same silent voice. Spinning around, he faced the clearing.

"Lola!" he cried.

She stood there, arms folded, her head thrown back in profound dignity and goddesslike loveliness.

"You have guessed well," she said softly. "Don't waste your time searching for something you'll never find. Your racial existence spans a few thousand years. Until it can be measured in tens of millions of years, there can be no intellectual contact between your civilization and our culture. *There is no common basis.*"

She smiled and it was obviously a gesture of farewell.

"Wait!" Sharp stumbled forward. "You can't desert us! We —we're like you!"

She threw her head back and laughed silently.

"Lola," I whispered urgently, "take me with you!"

"To the — country estate?"

Then she smiled warmly and extended her hand.

"Come," she said.

And we went — alone — together.

—DANIEL F. GALOUYE



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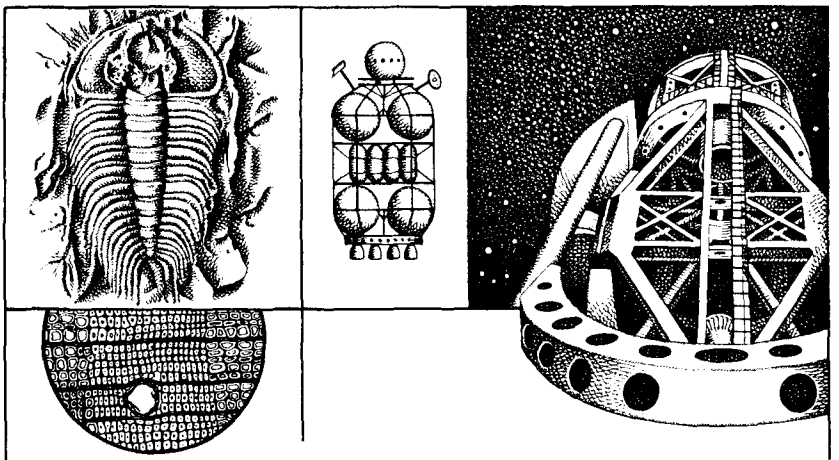

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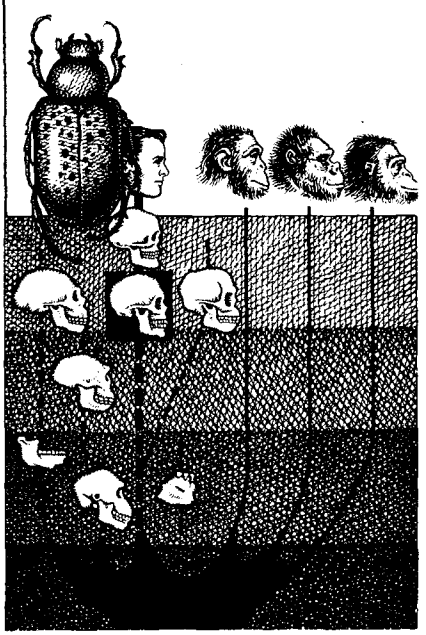

By WILLY LEY

## THE NOT QUITE PERENNIAL PHYLLOPOD

I CAN'T make up my mind whether I should begin by telling you what you might be able to see this summer after a rainstorm has finally ended a dry spell or whether I should be more systematic and first pin down what it is I am going to talk about. Maybe the latter will be the better way because, after finding out what I am going to discuss, you may decide that you won't have to investigate rain puddles after reading about it.



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Zoologists, you may know, divide all living things that are not vegetables into a number of major groups which they call phyla. Everything that has a backbone makes such a phylum, for example; all mollusks make a phylum and all one-celled animals make a phylum. One of these phyla bears the name of arthropoda.

The next smaller sub-division inside a phylum is the "class" and what kind of animals compose the phylum arthropoda will become clear quickly if I mention a few of the classes comprising it.

The insects are one of these classes and the arachnids (spiders and their relatives) are another one. The centipedes form another class and the crustaceans still another.

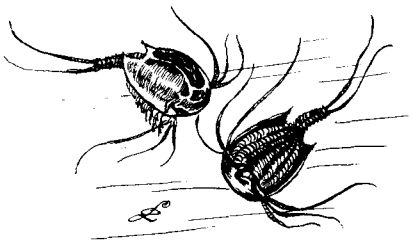
INSIDE a class, you have subclasses. In the case of the crustaceans, there are two which, by sheer coincidence, might be described as small crustaceans and large crustaceans; actually it is the presence or absence of abdominal appendages that counts. The ones without also happen to be minute, tiny or small in size and this subclass is called *Entomostraca.*

Inside the subclasses, you have "orders" and the one that interests us here is the order of the *Branchiopoda* which, if you insist on a translation, means "the gill-footed ones."

Inside the orders, you have sub-orders and the one I have in mind is called the sub-order of the *Phyllopoda* (*phyllodes* is Greek for "leaflike") and inside the sub-order you have, in this case, "divisions," of which the first is, at least, something fish fanciers among my readers should know by name — the division of the fairy shrimps. The division, in turn, is composed of "families" — the families of genera and the genera of species. The family is that of the *Apopidae* and the two families are *Lepidurus* and *Apus.*

It is *Apus* I want to tell about.

In appearance, it can best be compared to the well-known horseshoe crab of eastern North America. If you imagine a small horseshoe crab with a carapace about an inch in length, you also have a picture of the proper size. But Apus is much prettier.



**Apus cancriformis,** a crustacean in good standing but of irresponsible habits



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Like all the so-called fairy shrimps, it has a strong tendency to be transparent, but it runs to definite colors in spite of that. The wide, flat carapace is somewhere between amber yellow and pale gold, the body is reddish, the legs brownish and the tail is red. It is bigger than most of the other fairy shrimps and the result is that the other fairy shrimps constitute its food.

Apus cannot be called rare, for when it occurs, there are hundreds of them in any large puddle over an area of square miles. But one can never predict whether it will occur or not. In England it was observed, for example, in 1850. The next occurrence there — southern Scotland, to be precise — took place in 1907. And it hasn't been reported from Great Britain since.

It is because of these ultra-sporadic occurrences that many a naturalist who knows all about Apus has never seen one in the open. You can't go and look for Apus, or rather you can look, as I said before, when a rainstorm has ended a summer dry spell, but whether you find one is a case of rare luck.

CONSIDERING its habit of "rare abundance," Apus must have made its existence known quite some time ago, but it did not get into print until around 1725. A gentleman by the name of Johann Leonhard Frisch then published a series of quarto volumes under the general title of *Description of manyfold Insects* and in one of these volumes Apus appeared — with the name that is still in use.

Translated, the word Apus means "footless," which sounds slightly unbelievable when you look at the picture. But Frisch had a reason — he did not consider the many appendages of the Apus as feet. He was somewhat vague as to what they were, but he was sure that they were not feet and coined the name accordingly.

The next man to deal with Apus was the "pastor of the evangelical congregation of Regensburg," Johann Christian Schäffer, who successfully devoted his time between sermons to zoological problems. He declared in 1756 that the Apus was not a "water insect" as Frisch had said, nor an aquatic centipede as somebody else had guessed, but a relative of the crayfish, the lobster and the crab. Shäffer also found the eggs of the Apus and observed that they could be dried and kept dry for years, but that they hatched when the soil containing them was thrown into a container with water. He thereby explained how Apus could occur in a given place a few days after a storm.



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He also stated that a wind might pick up the dry eggs with dust and blow it to a place where Apus had not occurred for a long time. But then Schäffer found that he had researched himself into a corner from which he did not know how to escape.

He had carefully examined a large number of specimens and found that they all had eggs and thus were *all females!* He collected the eggs and let them hatch later. Another generation, every one of them a female! They laid eggs and Schäffer collected them.

This time he let each egg hatch in its separate container.

"I succeeded," he reported, "in that some of them grew up and I obtained eggs from them and young from these eggs. This was enough proof for me that they can produce and discharge fertile eggs without fertilization."

But after he had written down what his own observations had made clear, he found that he had observed something impossible — you could have eggs without a male around, but you could not have *fertile* eggs.

We now know that some arthropods can do just that, that unfertilized eggs will hatch into more females and that fertilization is the classical *conditio sine qua non* only if more males are to be produced.

Schäffer did not know this and the only way he could reconcile his observations and his convictions was to assume that the females he had examined were in reality hermaphrodites with both male and female sex glands. It wasn't so, but if Schäffer hadn't found this excuse, he would never have slept soundly again — unless, of course, he had gone on to become the discoverer of parthenogenesis.

BY ONE of these accidents of which the history of science is rich, the *male* Apus was discovered precisely one century after old Schäffer had published his observations. The discoverer was the Polish zoologist Kuzobowsky, the place of the discovery a puddle near Craków. Between these two dates there were two occurrences of Apus which did not influence its investigation and did not increase the store of knowledge, but which are worth mentioning.

It was during the Napoleonic wars, in 1806, that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, poet, statesman and amateur scientist, received a speciment of Apus. He was intensely interested and since business of all kinds did not permit him to hunt for Apus himself, he enlisted the aid of whoever was willing to do it for him. He offered a whole *Thaler* for an-



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other specimen, a guilder for the specimen after that and decreasing prizes for more, ending up with a minimum of six *pfennigs*.

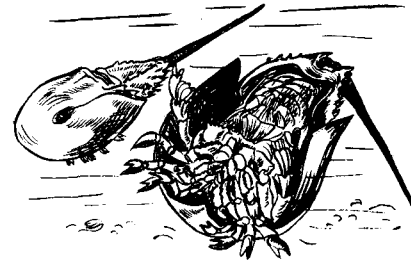
The inhabitants of Jena shook their heads, but many of them could use a *Thaler* and went looking. Without success, though, for Goethe never got to see a second Apus.

In Vienna, on the other hand, the circumstances were reversed. During the night from the 12th to the 13th of August, 1821, a rainstorm of fantastic magnitude and intensity burst over Vienna and vicinity. It was so powerful that all gutters were flooded and stayed flooded for weeks. Apus appeared in enormous numbers in these puddles and the women who always sold fish tried to sell Apus, too — but without finding any takers.

After Kuzobowsky had reported that the male Apus existed and could be found on occasion, the scene shifted once more, this time to Franconia, where Apus had put in an appearance for several years running, which in itself is a minor miracle.

The zoologist Karl Theodor Ernst von Siebold decided to find out once and for all whether the males, now known to exist, were needed for continuation of the species. He found what already had been mentioned, namely that fertilization was required for male offspring but not necessary for female offspring. The books now say that von Siebold was the rediscoverer of parthenogenesis, which is the technical term for this phenomenon. He is called *re*discoverer because it was later established that other zoologists had preceded him, though without finding any acceptance.

SINCE I had to compare Apus with the horseshoe crab as regards appearance, it is necessary to say a few words about this by no means rare inhabitant of the shallow waters of the Atlantic coast of the North American continent and of the shallow waters around the Spice Islands.



**Limulus polyphemus,** the horseshoe crab, which looks quite similar but is an arachnid

Among zoologists, the horseshoe crab, *Limulus*, had two distinctions for a long time. One was that it was the strangest living crab, the other that it was a "living fossil," for horseshoe crabs were known from deposits 200



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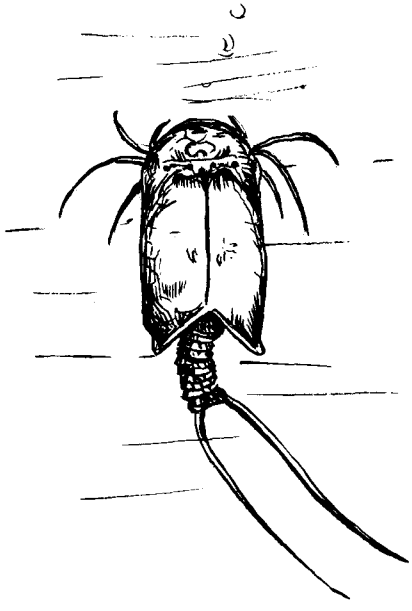
million years ago. That latter distinction still holds true, but scientists now know that the horseshoe crab is not a crab at all. It is still an arthropod, of course, but it belongs to the class of the arachnids. Of course you are at liberty to call it the strangest living arachnid.

As regards age, the horseshoe crab has recently received heavy competition from a relative of Apus. (I wish the specialists would get together on the names they use. In Europe, they now call their own Apus *Lepidurus apus.*)



**Triops cancriformis,** which has not changed for the last 200 million years

The name of the relative is *Triops cancriformis,* which looks rather like Apus, but seems to be slightly larger. Habits of occurrence are the same. The reason for mentioning it is that it has recently been found in the fossil state, in deposits from the youngest of the three subdivisions of the Triassic period, the so-called Keuper, of an age of very nearly 200 million years.

The only distinction between the living and the fossil form that could be found at all is a slight difference in size, the fossil form being the smaller one. But this could be an individual difference. It looks as if not only the "family" but the genus and probably even the species have not changed at all since the end of the Triassic period.

## THE MOUNTAIN BOOMER

THE ITEM on the Mountain Boomer of western Texas and vicinity has brought in a good deal of correspondence, some of it contradictory but all of it interesting.

Several readers living in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico wrote to say that they are well acquainted with their native reptiles, that they know some of them occasionally dash about running on their hind legs, but that they had *never* heard the



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**Western collared lizard.**

term Mountain Boomer.

A lady in New Mexico, on the other hand, did not claim to know much about reptiles, but knew that in some sections of Arizona the Gila Monster was called Mountain Boomer. There must have been some confusion somewhere, probably caused by the fact that the Mountain Boomer is *thought* to be poisonous and that the Gila Monster is *known* to be.

Finally, I have the promise of one reader in Texas to "go after it" this summer with notebook and camera.

A letter from Dr. Charles M. Bogert, chairman of the Department of Amphibians and Reptiles at the American Museum of Natural History, informed me that the term Mountain Boomer is mentioned in Dr. Leonard Stejneger's works as a synonym of the collared lizard, *Crotaphyllus collaris,* which ranges from Oregon to Mexico. Dr. Bogert explained that the collared lizard varies in color in various parts of their range, but that they are greenish in the plateau region of western Texas to western Arizona.

"In fact, the only thing wrong with Mr. Crutcher's description is the size," he wrote. "Collared lizards attain a maximum size of approximately 13 inches, and three feet was a bit of an exaggeration — the sort of thing that happens when a story is retold many years afterward."

I then checked with the *Handbook of Lizards* by Hobart M. Smith. It does not list Mountain Boomer as a synonym in the index or elsewhere, but it does have a good deal to say about the western collared lizard, *Crotaphytus collaris baileyi,* named by Stejneger. The overall length is about 13 inches, two-thirds of which are tail. Under the heading of *Habits,* it says: "If startled on flat ground where they can reach high speed in movement, they use only the hind legs, lifting the whole forepart of the body and the forelegs completely off the ground. Running in such a curious pose, they look like diminutive racing dinosaurs, waddling slightly as they rush along."

Of course they are not poisonous, although they are rather willing to bite on whatever they consider provocation. What I would still like to know, however, is why they were ever called Mountain Boomer and what is



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behind the story of the "whining" lizard that was told more than half a century ago.

## THE NAMES OF THE ELEMENTS

A READER in Brooklyn wrote me a letter a while back saying that, while looking through an older chemistry text, he had come across names of elements that did not agree with those with which he was familiar and asked me to tell him the names currently in use. I could not reply in the usual letter column because the answer would have been too long. But I am going to use the balance of this space for this topic now because I know that other people have been confused, too. Unless you know the history involved, it must be disconcerting to have tungsten suddenly appear under the name of wolfram, for example.

Most of the changes involve the two ends of the atomic scale because of the activities of the atomic energy experts. At the top of the scale, they merely added elements; at the bottom, they violated custom by doing something chemists do not consider "permissible" — they have given separate names to isotopes of the same element.

Element No. 1, hydrogen, is still called that if its atomic weight is "one" (approximately, that is), but double-weight or "heavy" hydrogen is deuterium, while triple-weight hydrogen is tritium. But element No. 2, helium, also has an isotope of about three units weight; this is called tralphium, though normal helium, of about four units weight, is still helium — unless you refer to its nucleus only, which is an "alpha particle."

Above helium, the sailing is clear for a while: No. 3, lithium; No. 4, beryllium; No. 5, boron; No. 6, carbon; No. 7, nitrogen; No. 8, oxygen; No. 9, fluorine and No. 10, neon.

When you come to No. 11, sodium, you may encounter a "hemispheric difference" in the naming; in Europe, it's usually natrium and its chemical symbol is *Na*.

Then there are again no problems for a while: No. 12, magnesium; No. 13, aluminum (aluminium in England, France and Germany); No. 14, silicon; No. 15, phosphorus; No. 16, sulfur; No. 17, chlorine; No. 18, argon.

With No. 19, potassium, another hemispheric difference crops up — its symbol is *K* and non-English speaking chemists call it kalium, since the name is derived from the Arab *al kaljun*, meaning wood ash.

Again there is clear sailing for a while: No. 20, calcium; No. 21, scandium; No. 22, titanium; No.



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23, vanadium; No. 24, chromium; No. 25, manganese; No. 26, iron; No. 27, cobalt; No. 28, nickel; No. 29, copper; No. 30, zinc; No. 31, gallium; No. 32, germanium; No. 33, arsenic; No. 34, selenium; No. 35, bromine; No. 36, krypton; No. 37, rubidium; No. 38, strontium; No. 39, yttrium and No. 40, zirconium.

THERE was a change a number of years ago with regard to No. 41, which used to be called columbium by American chemists while everybody else called it niobium. The chemical symbol was *Nb* anywhere and now the name niobium is official everywhere. No. 42 never gave any trouble; it was always molybdenum, though the name might confuse a classical philologist, for *molybdos* is Greek for "lead." No. 43 was first called *masurium* after an area in East Prussia, presumably the home of one of its first discoverers. But it is now internationally technetium with the symbolic *Tc*.

No linguistic problems for the next dozen or so: No. 44, ruthenium; No. 45, rhodium; No. 46, palladium; No. 47, silver (that the symbol of No. 47 is *Ag* is due to the Latin word for that metal: *argentum*); No. 48, cadmium; No. 49, indium; No. 50, tin (the symbol *Sn* is based on the Latin word for tin, *stannum*); No. 51, antimony (symbol is *Sb* from Latin name *stibium*); No. 52, tellurium; No. 53, iodine; No. 54, xenon; No. 55, caesium and No. 56, barium.

But now we get into turbulent waters, for we have arrived at the group called the rare earth metals. I have just looked at half a dozen popular books on chemistry and found that some authors believe in simplifying their own life rather than that of the reader when they come to the rare earths. Some simply wrote in their tables: "Nos. 51-71, rare earths" and two just said "Nos. 51-71." So I had better give the list first, beginning with the atomic number, followed by the chemical symbol, then the atomic weight (latest information I have, which may not be late enough) and finally the name:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 57 | La | 138.92 | lanthanium |
| 58 | Ce | 140.13 | cerium |
| 59 | Pr | 140.92 | praseodymium |
| 60 | Nd | 144.27 | neodymium |
| 61 | Pm | 144.50 | promethium |
| 62 | Sm | 150.43 | samarium |
| 63 | Eu | 152.0 | europium |
| 64 | Gd | 156.9 | gadolinium |
| 65 | Tb | 159.2 | terbium |
| 66 | Dy | 162.46 | dysprosium |
| 67 | Ho | 163.5 | holmium |
| 68 | Er | 167.2 | erbium |
| 69 | Tm | 169.4 | thulium |
| 70 | Yb | 173.04 | ytterbium |
| 71 | Lu | 174.99 | lutetium |



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IN OLDER books, you may find a "didymium" listed, which was just based on insufficient knowledge. Carl, Count Auer von Welsbach, the Austrian chemist, established that there were two elements he named praseodymium ("green twin") and neodymium ("new twin"). The word didymium meant "twin," too; it was supposed to be the "twin of lanthanum."

No. 61 was called "illinium" (from Illinois) at first; the definite identification and the name prometheum originated at Oak Ridge. Nos. 70 and 71 were discovered independently and nearly simultaneously by Auer von Welsbach of Austria and Georges Urbain of France. The names proposed by Auer von Welsbach (but not accepted) were *aldebaranium* for No. 70 and *cassiopeium* for No. 71. The now accepted names are both based on place names, Ytterby in Sweden and *Lutetia,* the original Latin name of Paris.

The next element above the rare earths is No. 72, hafnium. There never was any trouble with the name; the amusing thing is that it was coined by a Hungarian (Georg von Hevesy) who was then working in Copenhagen, which is Kjöbenhavn in Danish — at least most of the time, since they use two forms.

Now again things will go smoothly for a while: No. 73, tantalum; No. 74 — sorry, I talked too soon — No. 74 is the element with the symbol *W,* standing for wolfram, formerly known by its Swedish name of tungsten, now officially abolished. Then No. 75, rhenium (from Latin *Rhenus,* the Rhine); No. 76, osmium; No. 77, iridium; No. 78, platinum; No. 79, gold (the symbol *Au* is from the Latin name *aurum*); No. 80, mercury (symbol *Hg* from its old name *Hydrargium*); No. 81, thallium; No. 82, lead (symbol *Pb* is from


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Latin name *plumbum*); No. 83, bismuth; No. 84, polonium.

No. 85 was called alabamine (from Alabama) for some time, but the name is now astatine (from the Greek *astasia*, meaning "unsteady") and the symbol *At*, the reason being that of all of its isotopes known, the "longest-lived" has a half-life of about eight hours.

No. 86 is radon, symbol *Rn;* its first name immediately after discovery was "radium emanation." Since this was a clumsy word, the name "niton" was proposed, but radon was chosen.

No. 87 is now francium; an earlier claim to its discovery had proposed the name virginium. The symbol for francium is *Fa*. No. 88 is radium; No. 89, actinium; No. 90, thorium; No. 91, protactinium (the alternate form of the name, protoactinium, has been dropped) and No. 92, uranium. This was for many years considered the heaviest (with reference to its *atomic* weight) naturally occurring element.

Only fairly recently was it discovered that plutonium, which has a still higher atomic weight, does occur naturally in the very faintest of traces — it is far rarer naturally than the very rare radium. It is fully justified, therefore, to call all the "trans-uranic elements" artificial.

No. 93 is neptunium, No. 94, plutonium, with the symbols *Np,* and *Pu*. No. 95 is americium (symbol *Am*), No. 96, curium (symbol *Cm*) and Nos. 97 and 98, californium and berkelium, with the symbols *Cf* and *Bk*.

Should the whole mess be simplified? No doubt, but I'm afraid the revision would cause even more argument and confusion, calling for top-level conferences. Meanwhile, chemists can and do work with it, which is the important thing.

— WILLY LEY

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# A Gift From Earth

By MANLY BANISTER

***Except for transportation, it was absolutely free . . . but how much would the freight cost?***

Illustrated by KOSSIN

"IT is an outrage," said Koltan of the House of Masur, "that the Earthmen land among the Thorabians!"

Zotul, youngest of the Masur brothers, stirred uneasily. Personally, he was in favor of the coming of the Earthmen to the world of Zur.

At the head of the long, shining table sat old Kalrab Masur, in his dotage, but still giving what he could of aid and comfort to the Pottery of Masur, even though nobody listened to him any more and he knew it. Around the table sat the six brothers—Koltan, eldest and Director of the Pottery; Morvan, his vice-chief; Singula, their treasurer; Thendro, sales manager; Lubiosa, export chief; and last in the rank of age, Zotul, who was responsible for affairs of design.



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"Behold, my sons," said Kalrab, stroking his scanty beard. "What are these Earthmen to worry about? Remember the clay. It is our strength and our fortune. It is the muscle and bone of our trade. Earthmen may come and Earthmen may go, but clay goes on forever . . . and with it, the fame and fortune of the House of Masur."

"It *is* a damned imposition," agreed Morvan, ignoring his father's philosophical attitude. "They could have landed just as easily here in Lor."

"The Thorabians will lick up the gravy," said Singula, whose mind ran rather to matters of financial aspect, "and leave us the grease."

By this, he seemed to imply that the Thorabians would rob the Earthmen, which the Lorians would not. The truth was that all on Zur were panting to get their hands on that marvelous ship, which was all of metal, a very scarce commodity on Zur, worth billions of ken.

LUBIOSA, who had interests in Thorabia, and many agents there, kept his own counsel. His people were active in the matter and that was enough for him. He would report when the time was ripe.

"Doubtless," said Zotul unexpectedly, for the youngest at a conference was expected to keep his mouth shut and applaud the decisions of his elders, "the Earthmen used all the metal on their planet in building that ship. We cannot possibly bilk them of it; it is their only means of transport."

Such frank expression of motive was unheard of, even in the secret conclave of conference. Only the speaker's youth could account for it. The speech drew scowls from the brothers and stern rebuke from Koltan.

"When your opinion is wanted, we will ask you for it. Meantime, remember your position in the family."

Zotul bowed his head meekly, but he burned with resentment.

"Listen to the boy," said the aged father. "There is more wisdom in his head than in all the rest of you. Forget the Earthmen and think only of the clay."

Zotul did not appreciate his father's approval, for it only earned him a beating as soon as the old man went to bed. It was a common enough thing among the brothers Masur, as among everybody, to be frustrated in their desires. However, they had Zotul to take it out upon, and they did.

Still smarting, Zotul went back to his designing quarters and thought about the Earthmen. If it was impossible to hope for



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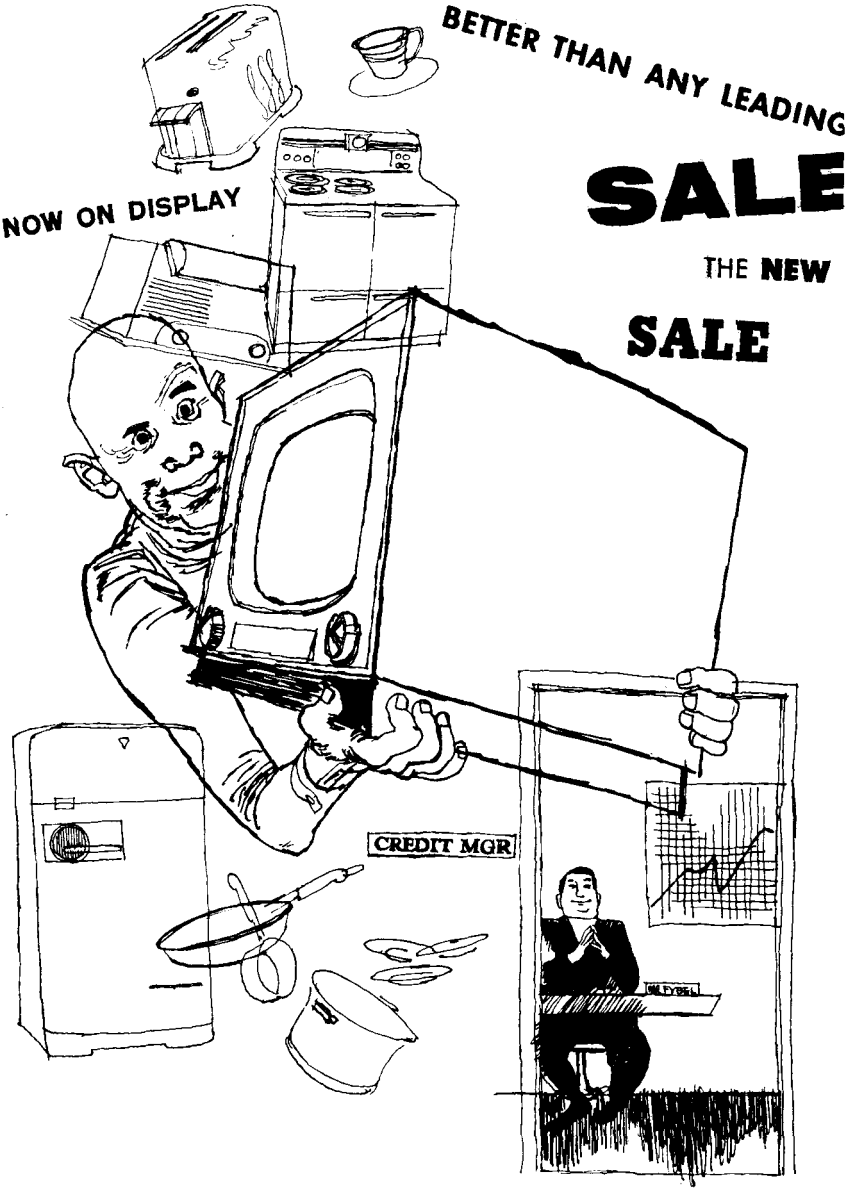




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much in the way of metal from the Earthmen, what could one get from them? If he could figure this problem out, he might rise somewhat in the estimation of his brothers. That wouldn't take him out of the rank of scapegoat, of course, but the beatings might become fewer and less severe.

BY and by, the Earthmen came to Lor, flying through the air in strange metal contraptions. They paraded through the tile-paved streets of the city, marveled here, as they had in Thorabia, at the buildings all of tile inside and out, and made a great show of themselves for all the people to see. Speeches were made through interpreters, who had much too quickly learned the tongue of the aliens; hence these left much to be desired in the way of clarity, though their sincerity was evident.

The Earthmen were going to do great things for the whole world of Zur. It required but the cooperation—an excellent word, that—of all Zurians, and many blessings would rain down from the skies. This, in effect, was what the Earthmen had to say. Zotul felt greatly cheered, for it refuted the attitude of his brothers without earning him a whaling for it.

There was also some talk going around about agreements made between the Earthmen and officials of the Lorian government, but you heard one thing one day and another the next. Accurate reporting, much less a newspaper, was unknown on Zur.

Finally, the Earthmen took off in their great, shining ship. Obviously, none had succeeded in chiseling them out of it, if, indeed, any had tried. The anti-Earthmen Faction—in any culture complex, there is always an "anti" faction to protest any movement of endeavor—crowed happily that the Earthmen were gone for good, and a good thing, too.

Such jubilation proved premature, however. One day, a fleet of ships arrived and after they had landed all over the planet, Zur was practically acrawl with Earthmen.

Immediately, the Earthmen established what they called "corporations"—Zurian trading companies under terrestrial control. The object of the visit was trade.

In spite of the fact that a terrestrial ship had landed at every Zurian city of major and minor importance, and all in a single day, it took some time for the news to spread.

The first awareness Zotul had was that, upon coming home from the pottery one evening, he found his wife Lania proudly



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brandishing an aluminum pot at him.

"What is that thing?" he asked curiously.

"A pot. I bought it at the market."

"Did you now? Well, take it back. Am I made of money that you spend my substance for some fool's product of precious metal? Take it back, I say!"

THE pretty young wife laughed at him. "Up to your ears in clay, no wonder you hear nothing of news! The pot is very cheap. The Earthmen are selling them everywhere. They're much better than our old clay pots; they're light and easy to handle and they don't break when dropped."

"What good is it?" asked Zotul, interested. "How will it hold heat, being so light?"

"The Earthmen don't cook as we do," she explained patiently. "There is a paper with each pot that explains how it is used. And you will have to design a new ceramic stove for me to use the the pots on."

"Don't be idiotic! Do you suppose Koltan would agree to produce a new type of stove when the old has sold well for centuries? Besides, why do you need a whole new stove for one little pot?"

"A dozen pots. They come in sets and are cheaper that way. And Koltan will have to produce the new stove because all the housewives are buying these pots and there will be a big demand for it. The Earthman said so."

"He did, did he? These pots are only a fad. You will soon enough go back to cooking with your old ones."

"The Earthman took them in trade—one reason why the new ones are so cheap. There isn't a pot in the house but these metal ones, and you will have to design and produce a new stove if you expect me to use them."

After he had beaten his wife thoroughly for her foolishness, Zotul stamped off in a rage and designed a new ceramic stove, one that would accommodate the terrestrial pots very well.

And Koltan put the model into production.

"Orders already are pouring in like mad," he said the next day. "It was wise of you to foresee it and have the design ready. Already, I am sorry for thinking as I did about the Earthmen. They really intend to do well by us."

The kilns of the Pottery of Masur fired day and night to keep up with the demand for the new porcelain stoves. In three years, more than a million had been made and sold by the Masurs alone, not counting the hundreds of thousands of copies



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turned out by competitors in every land.

IN the meantime, however, more things than pots came from Earth. One was a printing press, the like of which none on Zur had ever dreamed. This, for some unknown reason and much to the disgust of the Lorians, was set up in Thorabia. Books and magazines poured from it in a fantastic stream. The populace fervidly brushed up on its scanty reading ability and bought everything available, overcome by the novelty of it. Even Zotul bought a book—a primer in the Lorian language—and learned how to read and write. The remainder of the brothers Masur, on the other hand, preferred to remain in ignorance.

Moreover, the Earthmen brought miles of copper wire—more than enough in value to buy out the governorship of any country on Zur—and set up telegraph lines from country to country and continent to continent. Within five years of the first landing of the Earthmen, every major city on the globe had a printing press, a daily newspaper, and enjoyed the instantaneous transmission of news via telegraph. And the business of the House of Masur continued to look up.

"As I have always said from the beginning," chortled Director Koltan, "this coming of the Earthmen had been a great thing for us, and especially for the House of Masur."

"You didn't think so at first," Zotul pointed out, and was immediately sorry, for Koltan turned and gave him a hiding, single-handed, for his unthinkable impertinence.

It would do no good, Zotul realized, to bring up the fact that their production of ceramic cooking pots had dropped off to about two per cent of its former volume. Of course, profits on the line of new stoves greatly overbalanced the loss, so that actually they were ahead; but their business was now dependent upon the supply of the metal pots from Earth.

About this time, plastic utensils—dishes, cups, knives, forks—made their appearance on Zur. It became very stylish to eat with the newfangled paraphernalia . . . and very cheap, too, because for everything they sold, the Earthmen always took the old ware in trade. What they did with the stuff had been hard to believe at first. They destroyed it, which proved how valueless it really was.

The result of the new flood was that in the following year, the sale of Masur ceramic table service dropped to less than a tenth.



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TREMBLING with excitement at this news from their bookkeeper, Koltan called an emergency meeting. He even routed old Kalrab out of his senile stupor for the occasion, on the off chance that the old man might still have a little wit left that could be helpful.

"Note," Koltan announced in a shaky voice, "that the Earthmen undermine our business," and he read off the figures.

"Perhaps," said Zotul, "it is a good thing also, as you said before, and will result in something even better for us."

Koltan frowned, and Zotul, in fear of another beating, instantly subsided.

"They are replacing our high-quality ceramic ware with inferior terrestrial junk," Koltan went on bitterly. "It is only the glamor that sells it, of course, but before the people get the shine out of their eyes, we can be ruined."

The brothers discussed the situation for an hour, and all the while Father Kalrab sat and pulled his scanty whiskers. Seeing that they got nowhere with their wrangle, he cleared his throat and spoke up.

"My sons, you forget it is not the Earthmen themselves at the bottom of your trouble, but the *things* of Earth. Think of the telegraph and the newspaper, how these spread news of every shipment from Earth. The merchandise of the Earthmen is put up for sale by means of these newspapers, which also are the property of the Earthmen. The people are intrigued by these advertisements, as they are called, and flock to buy. Now, if you would pull a tooth from the kwi that bites you, you might also have advertisements of your own."

Alas for that suggestion, no newspaper would accept advertising from the House of Masur; all available space was occupied by the advertisements of the Earthmen.

In their dozenth conference since that first and fateful one, the brothers Masur decided upon drastic steps. In the meantime, several things had happened. For one, old Kalrab had passed on to his immortal rest, but this made no real difference. For another, the Earthmen had procured legal authority to prospect the planet for metals, of which they found a good deal, but they told no one on Zur of this. What they did mention was the crude oil and natural gas they discovered in the underlayers of the planet's crust. Crews of Zurians, working under supervision of the Earthmen, laid pipelines from the gas and oil regions to every major and minor city on Zur.



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BY the time ten years had passed since the landing of the first terrestrial ship, the Earthmen were conducting a brisk business in gas-fired ranges, furnaces and heaters . . . and the Masur stove business was gone. Moreover, the Earthmen sold the Zurians their own natural gas at a nice profit and everybody was happy with the situation except the brothers Masur.

The drastic steps of the brothers applied, therefore, to making an energetic protest to the governor of Lor.

At one edge of the city, an area had been turned over to the Earthmen for a spaceport, and the great terrestrial spaceships came to it and departed from it at regular intervals. As the heirs of the House of Masur walked by on their way to see the governor, Zotul observed that much new building was taking place and wondered what it was.

"Some new devilment of the Earthmen, you can be sure," said Koltan blackly.

In fact, the Earthmen were building an assembly plant for radio receiving sets. The ship now standing on its fins upon the apron was loaded with printed circuits, resistors, variable condensers and other radio parts. This was Earth's first step toward flooding Zur with the natural follow-up in its campaign of advertising—radio programs—with commercials.

Happily for the brothers, they did not understand this at the time or they would surely have gone back to be buried in their own clay.

"I think," the governor told them, "that you gentlemen have not paused to consider the affair from all angles. You must learn to be modern—keep up with the times! We heads of government on Zur are doing all in our power to aid the Earthmen and facilitate their bringing a great, new culture that can only benefit us. See how Zur has changed in ten short years! Imagine the world of tomorrow! Why, do you know they are even bringing *autos* to Zur!"

The brothers were fascinated with the governor's description of these hitherto unheard-of vehicles.

"It only remains," concluded the governor, "to build highways, and the Earthmen are taking care of that."

At any rate, the brothers Masur were still able to console themselves that they had their tile business. Tile served well enough for houses and street surfacing; what better material could be devised for the new highways the governor spoke of? There was a lot of money to be made yet.



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RADIO stations went up all over Zur and began broadcasting. The people bought receiving sets like mad. The automobiles arrived and highways were constructed.

The last hope of the brothers was dashed. The Earthmen set up plants and began to manufacture Portland cement.

You could build a house of concrete much cheaper than with tile. Of course, since wood was scarce on Zur, it was no competition for either tile or concrete. Concrete floors were smoother, too, and the stuff made far better road surfacing.

The demand for Masur tile hit rock bottom.

The next time the brothers went to see the governor, he said, "I cannot handle such complaints as yours. I must refer you to the Merchandising Council."

"What is that?" asked Koltan.

"It is an Earthman association that deals with complaints such as yours. In the matter of material progress, we must expect some strain in the fabric of our culture. Machinery has been set up to deal with it. Here is their address; go air your troubles to them."

The business of a formal complaint was turned over by the brothers to Zotul. It took three weeks for the Earthmen to get around to calling him in, as a representative of the Pottery of Masur, for an interview.

All the brothers could no longer be spared from the plant, even for the purpose of pressing a complaint. Their days of idle wealth over, they had to get in and work with the clay with the rest of the help.

Zotul found the headquarters of the Merchandising Council as indicated on their message. He had not been this way in some time, but was not surprised to find that a number of old buildings had been torn down to make room for the concrete Council House and a roomy parking lot, paved with something called "blacktop" and jammed with an array of glittering new automobiles.

An automobile was an expense none of the brothers could afford, now that they barely eked a living from the pottery. Still, Zotul ached with desire at sight of so many shiny cars. Only a few had them and they were the envied ones of Zur.

Kent Broderick, the Earthman in charge of the Council, shook hands jovially with Zotul. That alien custom conformed with, Zotul took a better look at his host. Broderick was an affable, smiling individual with genial laugh wrinkles at his eyes. A man of middle age, dressed in the baggy costume of Zur, he looked almost



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like a Zurian, except for an indefinite sense of alienness about him.

"Glad to have you call on us, Mr. Masur," boomed the Earthman, clapping Zotul on the back. "Just tell us your troubles and we'll have you straightened out in no time."

ALL the chill recriminations and arguments Zotul had stored for this occasion were dissipated in the warmth of the Earthman's manner.

Almost apologetically, Zotul told of the encroachment that had been made upon the business of the Pottery of Masur.

"Once," he said formally, "the Masur fortune was the greatest in the world of Zur. That was before my father, the famous Kalrab Masur—Divinity protect him—departed this life to collect his greater reward. He often told us, my father did, that the clay is the flesh and bones of our culture and our fortune. Now it has been shown how prone is the flesh to corruption and how feeble the bones. We are ruined, and all because of new things coming from Earth."

Broderick stroked his shaven chin and looked sad. "Why didn't you come to me sooner? This would never have happened. But now that it has, we're going to do right by you. That is the policy of Earth—always to do right by the customer."

"Divinity witness," Zorin said, "that we ask only compensation for damages."

Broderick shook his head. "It is not possible to replace an immense fortune at this late date. As I said, you should have reported your trouble sooner. However, we can give you an opportunity to rebuild. Do you own an automobile?"

"No."

"A gas range? A gas-fired furnace? A radio?"

Zotul had to answer no to all except the radio. "My wife Lania likes the music," he explained. "I cannot afford the other things."

Broderick clucked sympathetically. One who could not afford the bargain-priced merchandise of Earth must be poor indeed.

"To begin with," he said, "I am going to make you a gift of all these luxuries you do not have." As Zotul made to protest, he cut him off with a wave of his hand. "It is the least we can do for you. Pick a car from the lot outside. I will arrange to have the other things delivered and installed in your home."

"To receive gifts," said Zotul, "incurs an obligation."

"None at all," beamed the Earthman cheerily. "Every item is given to you absolutely free—a gift from the people of Earth.



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All we ask is that you pay the freight charges on the items. Our purpose is not to make profit, but to spread technology and prosperity throughout the Galaxy. We have already done well on numerous worlds, but working out the full program takes time."

He chuckled deeply. "We of Earth have a saying about one of our extremely slow-moving native animals. We say, 'Slow is the tortoise, but sure.' And so with us. Our goal is a long-range one, with the motto, 'Better times with better merchandise.' "

THE engaging manner of the man won Zotul's confidence. After all, it was no more than fair to pay transportation.

He said, "How much does the freight cost?"

Broderick told him.

"It may seem high," said the Earthman, "but remember that Earth is sixty-odd light-years away. After all, we are absorbing the cost of the merchandise. All you pay is the freight, which is cheap, considering the cost of operating an interstellar spaceship."

"Impossible," said Zotul drably. "Not I and all my brothers together have so much money any more."

"You don't know us of Earth very well yet, but you will. I offer you credit!"

"What is that?" asked Zotul skeptically.

"It is how the poor are enabled to enjoy all the luxuries of the rich," said Broderick, and went on to give a thumbnail sketch of the involutions and devolutions of credit, leaving out some angles that might have had a discouraging effect.

On a world where credit was a totally new concept, it was enchanting. Zotul grasped at the glittering promise with avidity. "What must I do to get credit?"

"Just sign this paper," said Broderick, "and you become part of our Easy Payment Plan."

Zotul drew back. "I have five brothers. If I took all these things for myself and nothing for them, they would beat me black and blue."

"Here." Broderick handed him a sheaf of chattel mortgages. "Have each of your brothers sign one of these, then bring them back to me. That is all there is to it."

It sounded wonderful. But how would the brothers take it? Zotul wrestled with his misgivings and the misgivings won.

"I will talk it over with them," he said. "Give me the total so I will have the figures."

The total was more than it ought to be by simple addition. Zotul pointed this out politely.

"Interest," Broderick explain-



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ed. "A mere fifteen per cent. After all, you get the merchandise free. The transportation company has to be paid, so another company loans you the money to pay for the freight. This small extra sum pays the lending company for its trouble."

"I see." Zotul puzzled over it sadly. "It is too much," he said. "Our plant doesn't make enough money for us to meet the payments."

"I have a surprise for you," smiled Broderick. "Here is a contract. You will start making ceramic parts for automobile spark plugs and certain parts for radios and gas ranges. It is our policy to encourage local manufacture to help bring prices down."

"We haven't the equipment."

"We will equip your plant," beamed Broderick. "It will require only a quarter interest in your plant itself, assigned to our terrestrial company."

ZOTUL, anxious to possess the treasures promised by the Earthman, won over his brothers. They signed with marks and gave up a quarter interest in the Pottery of Masur. They rolled in the luxuries of Earth. These, who had never known debt before, were in it up to their ears.

The retooled plant forged ahead and profits began to look up, but the Earthmen took a fourth of them as their share in the industry.

For a year, the brothers drove their shiny new cars about on the new concrete highways the Earthmen had built. From pumps owned by a terrestrial company, they bought gas and oil that had been drawn from the crust of Zur and was sold to the Zurians at a magnificent profit. The food they ate was cooked in Earthly pots on Earth-type gas ranges, served up on metal plates that had been stamped out on Earth. In the winter, they toasted their shins before handsome gas grates, though they had gas-fired central heating.

About this time, the ships from Earth brought steam-powered electric generators. Lines went up, power was generated, and a flood of electrical gadgets and appliances hit the market. For some reason, batteries for the radios were no longer available and everybody had to buy the new radios. And who could do without a radio in this modern age?

The homes of the brothers Masur blossomed on the Easy Payment Plan. They had refrigerators, washers, driers, toasters, grills, electric fans, air-conditioning equipment and everything else Earth could possibly sell them.

"We will be forty years paying it all off," exulted Zotul, "but



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meantime we have the things and aren't they worth it?"

But at the end of three years, the Earthmen dropped their option. The Pottery of Masur had no more contracts. Business languished. The Earthmen, explained Broderick, had built a plant of their own because it was so much more efficient — and to lower prices, which was Earth's unswerving policy, greater and greater efficiency was demanded. Broderick was very sympathetic, but there was nothing he could do.

The introduction of television provided a further calamity. The sets were delicate and needed frequent repairs, hence were costly to own and maintain. But all Zurians who had to keep up with the latest from Earth had them. Now it was possible not only to hear about things of Earth, but to see them as they were broadcast from the video tapes.

The printing plants that turned out mortgage contracts did a lush business.

FOR the common people of Zur, times were good everywhere. In a decade and a half, the Earthmen had wrought magnificent changes on this backward world. As Broderick had said, the progress of the tortoise was slow, but it was extremely sure.

The brothers Masur got along in spite of dropped options. They had less money and felt the pinch of their debts more keenly, but television kept their wives and children amused and furnished an anodyne for the pangs of impoverishment.

The pottery income dropped to an impossible low, no matter how Zotul designed and the brothers produced. Their figurines and religious ikons were a drug on the market. The Earthmen made them of plastic and sold them for less.

The brothers, unable to meet the Payments that were not so Easy any more, looked up Zotul and cuffed him around reproachfully.

"You got us into this," they said, emphasizing their bitterness with fists. "Go see Broderick. Tell him we are undone and must have some contracts to continue operating."

Nursing bruises, Zotul unhappily went to the Council House again. Mr. Broderick was no longer with them, a suave assistant informed him. Would he like to see Mr. Siwicki instead? Zotul would.

Siwicki was tall, thin, dark and somber-looking. There was even a hint of toughness about the set of his jaw and the hardness of his glance.

"So you can't pay," he said,



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tapping his teeth with a pencil. He looked at Zotul coldly. "It is well you have come to us instead of making it necessary for us to approach you through the courts."

"I don't know what you mean," said Zotul.

"If we have to sue, we take back the merchandise and everything attached to them. That means you would lose your houses, for they are attached to the furnaces. However, it is not as bad as that—yet. We will only require you to assign the remaining three-quarters of your pottery to us."

The brothers, when they heard of this, were too stunned to think of beating Zotul, by which he assumed he had progressed a little and was somewhat comforted.

"To fail," said Koltan soberly, "is not a Masur attribute. Go to the governor and tell him what we think of this business. The House of Masur has long supported the government with heavy taxes. Now it is time for the government to do something for us."

THE governor's palace was jammed with hurrying people, a scene of confusion that upset Zotul. The clerk who took his application for an interview was, he noticed only vaguely, a young Earthwoman. It was remarkable that he paid so little attention, for the female terrestrials were picked for physical assets that made Zurian men covetous and Zurian women envious.

"The governor will see you," she said sweetly. "He has been expecting you."

"Me?" marveled Zotul.

She ushered him into the magnificent private office of the governor of Lor. The man behind the desk stood up, extended his hand with a friendly smile.

"Come in, come in! I'm glad to see you again."

Zotul stared blankly. This was not the governor. This was Broderick, the Earthman.

"I—I came to see the governor," he said in confusion.

Broderick nodded agreeably. "I am the governor and I am well acquainted with your case, Mr. Masur. Shall we talk it over? Please sit down."

"I don't understand. The Earthmen . . ." Zotul paused, coloring. "We are about to lose our plant."

"You were about to say that the Earthmen are taking your plant away from you. That is true. Since the House of Masur was the largest and richest on Zur, it has taken a long time—the longest of all, in fact."

"What do you mean?"

"Yours is the last business on



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Zur to be taken over by us. We have bought you out."

"Our government . . ."

"Your governments belong to us, too," said Broderick. "When they could not pay for the roads, the telegraphs, the civic improvements, we took them over, just as we are taking you over."

"You mean," exclaimed Zotul, aghast, "that you Earthmen own everything on Zur?"

"Even your armies."

"But *why?*"

BRODERICK clasped his hands behind back, went to the window and stared down moodily into the street.

"You don't know what an overcrowded world is like," he said. "A street like this, with so few people and vehicles on it, would be impossible on Earth."

"But it's mobbed," protested Zotul. "It gave me a headache."

"And to us it's almost empty. The pressure of population on Earth has made us range the Galaxy for places to put our extra people. The only habitable planets, unfortunately, are populated ones. We take the least populous worlds and—well, buy them out and move in."

"And after that?"

Broderick smiled gently. "Zur will grow. Our people will intermarry with yours. The future population of Zur will be neither true Zurians nor true Earthmen, but a mixture of both."

Zotul sat in silent thought. "But you did not have to buy us out. You had the power to conquer us, even to destroy us. The whole planet could have been yours alone." He stopped in alarm. "Or am I suggesting an idea that didn't occur to you?"

"No," said Broderick, his usually smiling face almost pained with memory. "We know the history of conquest all too well. Our method causes more distress than we like to inflict, but it's better —and more sure—than war and invasion by force. Now that the unpleasant job is finished, we can repair the dislocations."

"At last I understand what you said about the tortoise."

"Slow but sure." Broderick beamed again and clapped Zotul on the shoulder. "Don't worry. You'll have your job back, the same as always, but you'll be working for us . . . until the children of Earth and Zur are equal in knowledge and therefore equal partners. That's why we had to break down your caste system."

Zotul's eyes widened. "And that is why my brothers did not beat me when I failed!"

"Of course. Are you ready now to take the assignment papers for you and your brothers to sign?"

"Yes," said Zotul. "I am ready." —MANLY BANISTER



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*It was bad enough being treated like a freak—now there was the horror of what I had done to . . .*

# TWINK

## By THEODORE STURGEON

**Illustrated by ASHMAN**

FEELING numb, I put the phone down. I've got to get out of here, I thought. I've got to go ask old Frozen Face. I've got to get home.

But there was the old man, just that minute coming out of his office. For the first time, I was glad he'd put my desk out there in front of the golden-oak slab of his door, like a welcome mat. I looked up at him and I guess I looked anxious.

He stopped beside me. "Something wrong?"

I wet my lips, but I couldn't say anything. Stupid! Why shouldn't I be able to say *I've got to get out of here!*

"The kid?"

"Yes," I said. "We have to take her in this afternoon."

"Well, get out of here," he said brusquely.

I stood up. I couldn't look at him. "Thanks."

"Shaddap," he said gruffly. "Call up if you need anything."

"I won't need anything." Except courage. Faith, if you like. And whatever kind of hypocrisy it takes to conceal from a child how scared you are.

I reached for my hat. Old Frozen Face just stood there. I looked back from the outer door and he was still there, staring at the place where I'd been.



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I ALMOST yelled at him some explosive, blathering series of syllables that would in some way explain to him that I'm not a freak; look at the creases in my blue pants; look at my shoeshine, just the same as yours; look how my hairline's receding—look, look, I've got heartburn and lumps in my throat!

At the same time, I wanted to yell something else, something about, yes, you were kind to me because you know what's with me, with my kid; but you can't know *how* it is. With you, I'm once removed from anything you could feel, like the Hundred Neediest Cases in the newspaper at Christmas. You believe it, sure, but you can't know how it is.

So with one inner voice saying *I'm what you are* and another saying *You can't know how it is,* I let them crash together and silence one another, and said nothing, but made the frosted glass door swing shut and walked over to the elevators.

I had to wait and that seemed wrong. I looked at the indicators, and saw that all of the cars were running, and that seemed wrong, too. Everything else ought to stop except one car for me and it ought to be here *now!* I stood there realizing how irrational all this was, but fuming anyway.

Behind me, I heard *thunk*-pat, *thunk*-pat, and from the corner of my eye saw it was Bernie Pitt on his crutches. I turned very slightly so my back was to him. Bernie is a very nice guy, but I just didn't want to talk to anybody. It was as if talking to somebody would slow up the elevator.

I hoped he hadn't noticed my turning away like that. Then I found I could see his reflection in the polished gray-green marble of the wall by the elevator. He was looking at me; I could see his face tilt as he glanced down at the hat I was twisting in my hands. Then it tipped up and back a little as he studied the tops of the doors, the way a man does when he wants to look as if he's absorbed in his own thoughts. So he'd seen that hat, at ten in the morning, and that meant I was going out, and he knew all about me and Twink and the accident, and was being considerate.

Old Frozen Face was being considerate, too. Old Frozen Face always did the correctly considerate thing. Like hiring Bernie, who was a cripple.

I hated myself for thinking that.

It made me hate Bernie. I glared at his reflection. Just then, one of the elevator doors across the corridor rolled open and I jumped and spun.

"Up!" said the operator.



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Bernie stumped into it without looking at me. The door closed. I wished I had a rock to throw at it.

I tried hard to get hold of myself. I knew what was happening. Scare a man badly enough, and then make the thing he fears diffuse and unreachable, and he'll lash out indiscriminately at everything and everyone. Well, lash away, boy, I told myself, and get it out of your stinking small-minded system before you get home.

"Down?" the operator asked.

SHOULDERING into the car, I felt I had a right to be sore at the operator for taking so long. The elevator was full of intruders and the descent took forever, and for a moment I got so mad, I swear I could have hunched my shoulders and sprayed them all with adrenalin. Then the doors opened again and there was the lobby like a part of all outdoors, and the offices upstairs no longer contained or confined me, and their people no longer intruded.

I scurried down the steps and along the concourse to the interurban station, trusting my feet and letting the rest of me fly along with the eager aimlessness of a peace-dove released at a school pageant.

How can there be any unreality in your cosmos? I asked myself. The day Twink goes to the hospital—that's *today;* it's *here.* It's been a real thing all this time, for all it was in the future; it was more real than most other things in the world. And now it's come and you're walking underwater, seeing through murk.

But the whole world's helping, too. Nothing is so unreal to the commuter as a commuter's station at ten in the morning. The trains, lying in these echoing acres, look like great eviscerated larva. The funereal train-crew, gossiping as if their work was done, as if it wasn't their job to get me home before the sawbones went to work on my little girl.

I went to them. "Baytown?"

They looked at me, a conductor, a motorman, a platform man. They were different sizes and shapes, but their faces were all the same gray and contained the same damnable sense of the fitness of things. They were in a place that belonged to them, doing the right thing at the right time in it. They were steady and sober and absolutely at the service of commuters-by-the-ton, but a man outbound at ten in the morning, though tolerable, could hardly be served. He wasn't what they were there for.

I went into the train and sat down and looked at my watch. Four minutes. They were going to make me wait four minutes.



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I SAT in an empty car and looked at the glare of yellow woven plastic pretending to be rattan, steel panels pretending to be wood, and the advertising signs. There were three kinds of signs: the imperatives, which said *Buy* and *Drink* and *Use;* the comparatives, which said *Better, Richer, Finer* (and never stated what they were better and richer and finer than); and the nominatives, which stupidly and without explanation proclaimed a name.

I snorted at them all and reached for a paper someone had left on a nearby seat. If its previous owner had been there, I think I'd have punched him right in the mouth. I've always respected books and I've always felt that a paper is a sort of book. This character had put the middle section in upside down, folded some sheets back on themselves and away from the centerline, so that page covers skewed and flopped all around, and he had generally churned up and mutilated the dead white body before discarding it.

Growling, I began to put it back together again.

CHEERFUL TONY WEAKER

Doomed Child Sinking. Gifts and Cards Pouring In for 'Early Birthday'

NEW YORK, June 25 (AP)—1973's Child of the Year, five-year-old Tony Marshall, has been placed under oxygen at Memorial Hospital, while a staff of top cancer specialists stand a 24-hour watch at his bedside. Hope that he will live to see his sixth birthday in August has faded.

The boy, whose famous smile made him known from coast to coast as Cheerful Tony, is suffering from advanced lukemia.

Angrily I hurled the paper away from me. It came to pieces in midair and fluttered to the floor, to lie there accusingly and stare at me. I swore and got up and gathered it together and crammed it out of sight on the seat ahead of mine.

"Cheerful Tony," I muttered. Some convolution of the face muscles, some accident of the dental arch, a trick of the light and the fortuitous presence of a news photographer as lucky as the guy who got the flag-raising at Iwo—put 'em all together and you've got a national hero. What good did it do to anyone to read about Cheerful Tony or to write about it? What good did it do Tony?

For an ugly moment, I wished I could trade places with Tony's father. All he had to worry about was cancer—nice, certain cancer—and once it was finished, that would be the end of it.



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But I didn't envy him the publicity, and for the hundred thousandth time, I thanked the Powers that so few people knew about Twink.

The doors slid shut and the train started. I let go a sigh of relief and hunched back in my seat, wondering how to make the time go faster. Not the time; the train. I pushed my feet uselessly against the legs of the next seat, made a calm and childish calculation of what I was doing (forty pounds foot-pressure forward, forty pounds shoulder-pressure backward—equals zero) and sat up feeling like a fool. I began to look at the ads again.

Imperative, comparative, nominative.

MAYBE my technique had been wrong all along. Maybe I should have used nothing but advertising tactics on Twink the whole time. After all, those were tested methods, with more than a century of proof behind them.

"Relax with oxygen," I should have told her. "Live," I should have told her, twelve times a minute, in the best imperative mood. "Live . . . live." And, "Don't struggle. Let the doctor work. It will be easier." (Than what?) And, of course, the pervasive, institutional nominative: "Twink. Everybody knows Twink. Everybody loves Twink." Until she believes it all . . .

THE anger, which had changed to hysteria, converted itself now into crawling depression. It descended on me like the shadow of some great reptile, something that moved slowly and implacably and without human understanding. I felt utterly alone. I was different. Apart. More apart than Bernie, who had left half a leg in Formosa. More than Sue Gaskell, who was the only Negro in the copy department—by God, another "kindness" of old Frozen Face.

Why couldn't someone (besides Twink) share this with me? Even Doris couldn't. Doris loved me; she ate with me, slept with me, worried and hoped with me, but this thing with Twink was something she couldn't share. She just wasn't equipped for it. Sometimes I wondered how she held still for that. This might go on for years . . . if Twink lived at all . . . Twink and I sharing a thing that Doris could never know, even being Twink's mother.

Suddenly I found someone else to be mad at and the depression lifted enough to let it in. You guys, I thought, you helpful people who put welded track on these roadbeds, who designed pneumatic dampers and cushioned wheels for the trains—did it



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ever occur to you that a man might want something to listen to in a train in 1973? Twenty years ago, I could have listened to the wheels and I could have made up a song to go along with them: *blippety-clak, blippety-clak.*

Blippety-clink, poor little Twink, don't let her die—

All right, fellows—on second thought, you can have your welded rails.

"Baytown," said the annunciator in a cultured voice, and deceleration helped me up out of the seat.

I went to the door and was through it before it had slid all the way open, shot down the platform while fumbling for my commuter's plate, missed the scanner slot with it and skinned my knuckles, dropped the plate, picked it up, got it into the slot, waited forever—well, three seconds—while it scanned, punched and slid out my receipt.

I was just about to blow a fuse because there was no taxi, but there was. I couldn't bark my address because the driver knew it, and I couldn't wave bribes at him because he was paid by the development, and anyway his turbines had a governor to keep him from speeding as fast as I wanted. All I could do was huddle on the cushion and bite the ball of my thumb.

THE house was very quiet. For some reason, I had expected to find them in the nursery, but there wasn't a sound from there. I found Doris stretched out on the settee in the den, looking drowsy.

"Doris!"

"Shh. 'Lo. Twink asleep."

I ran to her. "Is she . . . do you . . . are you . . ."

She rumpled my hair. "Shhh," she said again. "My goodness, it's going to be all right."

I leaned very close and whispered, "Scared. I'm scared."

"I'm scared, too," she said reasonably, "but I'm not going to go all to pieces."

I knelt there, soaking up a kind of strength, a kind of peace from her. "Sorry, darling. I've been—" I shuddered. "On the train, I was reading about Cheerful Tony. I was thinking how they'd do the same thing with us, if they knew."

"Only more." She half-laughed. "All that mail, all those reporters, newsreel men. All that glory. All that—noise."

We listened together to the morning silence. It was the first time since she'd phoned me that I'd noticed how lovely the day was.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For not telling them. For being—well, for just being; I



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guess that's what I'm trying to say. And for Twink."

"For *Twink?*"

"Of course. She's my little girl. If it hadn't been for you, I'd never have known her."

"I think the way motherhood makes people crazy is one of the nicest things around," I said.

She answered, but with her eyes. Then she said, "We have to be there at noon."

I looked at my watch, leaped wildly to my feet, turned left, turned right.

Doris openly laughed at me. "How long does it take to get to the hospital?" she asked.

"Well, ten minutes, but we have to . . . don't we have to, uh?"

"No, we don't. We have more than an hour. Sit down and help me be quiet. Want something to eat before we go?"

"No. God, no. Shall I fix—"

"Not for me."

"Oh." Slowly I sat down again.

She giggled. "You're funny."

"Yeah."

"Have any trouble getting away?" She was making talk, I knew, but I went right along with it.

"Matter of fact, no," I said. "Old Frozen Face took one look at me after you called and chased me out."

"He's so wonderful . . . Honey! *Don't* call him that!"

I GROWLED something wordless. "He makes me mad."

"After all he's done?"

"Yes, after all he's done," I said irritably.

*Because* of all he's done, I think. All my life, I'm a misfit for one reason or another; then, in college, they found out this thing about me and I worked my way through being a laboratory curiosity. I got into the papers. Not too much—just enough to keep me from getting any decent job after I graduated. Except with Frozen Face, of course. I didn't apply; he wrote me. He hired all his people that way. People with half a leg. Blind people in Personnel. Ex-cons who couldn't get started.

At first, it looked as if his people had escaped the things that hung over them—thanks to him. Then, after a while, you began to realize that you wouldn't be working there if you didn't have something wrong with you. It was like starving all your life until you found you could be well fed and taken care of till the day you died—in a leprosarium.

But I said, "Sorry, Doris. Just naturally ungrateful, I guess . . . Twink's waking up."

"Oh, dear! I thought she might sleep until—"

"Shh."

Ever since the accident (I'd turned the car over; they say you



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can't do that with any car later than 1970, but I'm the guy), Twink had terrified me every time she woke up. She'd come out of the normal sleep of a normal baby and enter a frightening stillness, a cessation of everything but life itself. It was, I suppose, coma; but I'd lived with seven weeks of it once, and even now the momentary passage through it, from sleep to waking, was so loaded with terror and guilt for me that it was all I could take. And when you add to that the fact that I had to hide it, that above all else I had to be strength to her, and comfort, as she awoke—

Then it was over; she was awake, confused, dimly happy.

"Hi, baby. How's my Twink?"

Doris, tense on the couch, not breathing, waiting—

"It's all right. Twink's all right," I said.

"Well, of course!"

I shot Doris a look. There wasn't a hairline crack in that enamel of hers, but it suddenly occurred to me that it was past time for me to stop using her as the pillar of strength around here. I bent and kissed her and said (making it sound like a joke, because I knew she'd prefer it that way), "Okay, honey; from here on, you can scream curses."

"I'll just do that," she said gratefully.

DID the accident have anything directly to do with it or was it just me? Champlain (yes, *the* Champlain, who took up where Rhine left off) had a number of theories about. The most likely one was that when my peculiar equipment got stirred up enough in the crash and for that awful hour afterward, I sent such a surge of empathy at Twink that I created a response. You can call it telepathy if you like—Champlain did—but I don't like the sound of that. Of course, I'm biased. You can take your extrasensoria, all of them, and—well, just take 'em and leave me be.

It may be that I was better equipped than the next guy to adjust to this, having lived for some eight years with the mild notoriety of being the boy who never scored less than 88 on the Rhine cards. But personally, constitutionally, I never was meant to be different from other people. What I mean is that my useless ability (I don't regard it as a talent and I *won't* call it a gift) didn't have to make any difference to anyone. I could be just as good a short-order cook, just as bad a ticket-taker, as anyone else. But I was never given the chance of living like a human being.

I could stick around the parapsychology laboratories, earning a living like an ape in the zoo



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(and not much of a living at that; even in this enlightened era, there isn't a rich parapsychologist, or I could go out and get a job. And the way my dark past followed me, you'd think I was wearing a Flying Saucer for a halo. "Oh, yes—you're the mind-reading fellow." You know what that can do to your prospects?

Usually I didn't get the job. Once I was hired, though, they knew. Twice I landed jobs and they found out later. Each time there was someone who went to the boss, seniority and all, and said, "Look, it's him or me." And guess who got the pink slip.

Would you work every day with somebody who could read your mind? Who hasn't got secrets? Whose life really is an open book? I can tell you, *I* wouldn't work next to someone like that, yet I'm about as inoffensive as they come. And what was driving me out of my head—and I was two-thirds out when I met Doris and then Frozen Face—was that everyone thought I could read minds and *I can't!*

BUT Doris, who had heard of me even before she met me, never mentioned it. First she was nice to be with, and then I had to be with her, and then I came to a big, fat, soul-searching decision and confessed All to her one night, and she kissed me on the end of the nose and said she'd known about it all along and it didn't matter; and if I said I couldn't read minds but was only good at guessing Rhine cards, why, she believed me; and if I ever did learn to read minds, she wished I'd hurry up and read hers, because she was getting awfully impatient. After that, I'd have married her if she looked like a gila monster. Actually she looked like the Tenniel Alice-in-Wonderland, only with curly hair.

When I came up for breath from that interchange, I liked people a hell of a lot more than I ever had before. I guess that's another way of saying I liked myself some, at last.

Then along came the letter from Frozen Face, and Twink came up, and the accident happened.

And after the accident, the nightmare ability to dip down into the living silence that was Twink now, an unstirring something that couldn't see or speak or hear, something that was dreadfully hurt and just hovering, barely alive.. My kid. And after about seven weeks, a movement, a weak tensing. It was the faintest possible echo of fear, and always a retreat from it that shoved the little thing close to dying again. Then there would be the silence again, and the stir-



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ring, and the fear and retreat.

Why I tried, how I thought to try, I don't know, but I did what I could each time to reassure her. I would tense till I ached and say, *It's all right, honey, don't be afraid, it's all over now.* And I hoped it helped her, and then I thought it did, and then one night I knew it did, because I saw the tension coming and stopped it, and there was a different kind of silence, like sleeping, not like coma.

After that, she got better fast, and I took hold of the slim hope that she might one day see and run and climb like other kids, hear music, go to school . . .

She had to, she *had* to, or I was a murderer. I was worse than that. Your out-and-out murderer knows what he's doing. More likely than not, he does it to get something, for profit.

But me—want to know what I did?

We'd been out for a drive in our shiny new car—well, it was second-hand, but the newest one I'd ever owned—and I wanted to get a couple of cartons of cigarettes before we crossed the state line, to save—guess!—a few cents tax. It was a six-lane road, three each way. I was in my middle lane.

Doris pointed at a big neon sign. "There's a place!"

I hauled the wheel over and shot straight across the right-hand lane. The truck just nipped the rear fender and over we went.

For six cents. Come to think of it, I never did buy the cigarettes, so I can't even claim that.

There's your superman, "wild talents" and all. A goddam highway boob.

Doris and Twink went to the hospital, bleeding and bleeding, then lying for days, waxy, doll-like, and came out, back to me, saying it wasn't my fault it wasn't my fault . . . God! And Twink as good as dead.

THERE was a reception committee waiting for us—two big names in medicine, McClintock and Zein—and, of course, C h a m p l a i n. Busy boy. He wouldn't miss this for the world. But, thank heavens, no press.

"Come on, I want to talk to you," said Champlain, big, breezy as ever, looking like the world's least likely suspect as a parapsychologist. I never did like Champlain, but he was the only person in the world besides Doris I could really talk to. At the moment, I wished I hadn't ever talked to him. Especially about Twink. But he knew and that was that.

He muscled me away from Doris and Twink.

"*No!*" cried Doris, and Twink was frightened.



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"Now don't you worry, little lady; he'll be back with you before we do a thing," he called heartily, and there I was going one way and Doris and Twink the other. What could I do?

He pushed me through a door and I had the choice of sitting in a big armchair or falling down, the way he rushed me. He kicked the door shut.

"Here's some medicine." He got a bottle out of the top desk drawer. "McClintock let me see where he put it, the fool."

"I don't want any."

"Come on now."

"Get away from me," I said, and meant it. Inside myself, I turned to admire that tone, harsh and rough and completely decisive. I'd always thought only movie gangsters could make a speech like that sound so real. And while I was backing off from myself, admiring, I suddenly sobbed and swore and swore and sobbed. It was pretty disgusting.

"Wow," said Champlain. He put the bottle down and got some pills. He filled a paper cup with ice-water and came over to me. "Take these."

"I don't want any."

"You'll take'm or I'll hold your nose and ram 'em down your neck with a stick!"

I took them and the water. As I keep saying, I'm no superman. "What are they?"

"Dexamyl. Brighten you up, smooth you down all at once. Now tell me what's the matter."

I said it, said what I hadn't put in words before. "Twink's going to die. I want her to."

"The two best specialists in the world say no."

"Let her die! She's going out of here as a basket case if you don't! I know. I know better'n anybody. Blind. Deaf. Paralyzed. All she can do is sort of flop. Let her die!"

"Don't be so goddam selfish."

A kick in the face would have shocked me a good deal less. I just gawked at him.

"Sure, selfish," he repeated. "You pulled a little bobble that anybody might have done and your wife won't blame you for it. To you, it's become a big, important bobble because you never were involved in anything important before. The only way you can prove it's important is to suffer an important punishment. The worst thing you can think of is to have Twink dead. The next worse is to have her go through life the way she is now. You *want* one of those things."

I CALLED him something.

"Sure I am," he agreed. "Absolutely. In the eyes of the guy who's wrong, the guy who's right is always just what you said."



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I used another one.

"That, too," he said, and beamed.

I put up my hands and let them fall. "What do you want me to do? What are you picking on me for?"

He came over and sat sideways on the broad arm of the chair. "I want you to get in there and help us. Help Twink."

"I'd be in the way."

He hit me on the shoulder-blade. It was done as a sort of friendly gesture, but it was done hard. "You can get through to her, can't you?"

"Yes."

"She's been hurt. Badly. This is going to hurt her, too— a whole lot. She may not want to go through with it."

"She has a choice?"

"Every patient has a choice. Other things being equal, they live or they don't. If they've been hurt and they see more pain coming, they might not want to go through with it."

"I still don't see how I—"

"Would you like to keep wondering whether you could have saved her life?"

"She's going to die, anyway."

He got up and stood in front of me with his big fists on his hips, glaring at me silently until I had to raise my face. He held me with his eyes until I couldn't stand it and then he said, rough and gentle like a tiger purring, "You damn near killed her once and now you want to finish the job. That it?"

"All right, all *right!*" I shouted. "I'll do it, I'll do *anything!*"

"Good!" And suddenly he dropped on one knee and took both of my hands in both of his. It was a very surprising thing for him to do and strangely effective. I could feel currents of his immense vitality from those big hands; it was as if my ego, wrinkled like a prune, was swelling up sleek and healthy.

He said, softly and with deep earnestness, "All you've got to do is make her want to live. You've got to be with her and wait for her and help her along and keep her convinced that no matter what happens, no matter how it hurts, it's worth it because *she's going to live.*"

"All right," I whispered.

"She's only a little girl. She takes things just the way she finds them and she doesn't make allowances. If something looks like fear to her, or anger, it *is* that. If something looks like love, or wisdom, or strength, that's just how she'll take it. Be strong and wise for her."

"Me?"

He got up. "You." He went to the desk and got the bottle and poured a paper cup full. He held it out to me.



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I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands and stood up. "No, thanks. I don't need it," I told him.

He twitched his eyebrows and drank the liquor himself and we went out.

THEY put me through the scrub room just as if I'd been a surgeon—gloves, mask and all—and then we went into the operating theater. Doris was already there, all fixed up, too. I went and kissed her right through the mask and she smiled.

I said, "You look lovely in white," and wondered where that had come from; and, "Hi-i, Twink."

Somewhere in the blindness, in the confines of paralysis, there was a shadow of fear and, down inside that, a warm little response. And the fear evaporated. I looked up and met Champlain's eyes. That unnatural feeling under my mask was, to my complete astonishment, a grin. I nodded and he winked back and said, "I guess you can go ahead, Mac."

Now listen, Twink, I said with all my heart, I love you and I'm here. I'm right here with you no matter what happens. Something's going to happen, something big, and it's going to change everything for you. Some of it won't be . . . won't be nice. But they have to do it. For you, Twink. Even when it isn't nice, it's for you. You've got to let them. You've got to help them. They love you, but I love you most of all. You mustn't go away. If it hurts you too much, you just tell me and I'll make them stop.

Then something was the matter, very much the matter. Shaken, I crowded close and tried to see what McClintock was doing. "Back off a little," he growled.

"Back off, my eyeball. What the hell are you winding around her head?"

Champlain barked at me, "Cut it out! The one thing you don't get is angry!"

Doris made a little sound. I spun to her. She was smiling. No, she wasn't. Her eyes were all screwed up. A tear came out.

"Doris!"

Her face relaxed instantly, as if the nerves had been cut. Then she opened her eyes and looked at me. "I'm all right," she said.

There was a calling, a calling, a calling.

All right, Twink, I'm here. I didn't go away. I'm right here, honey. If you want them to stop, you just say so.

A pause, then a tremulous questioning.

Yes, yes, I said, I'm here. Every single second. I'm not going away. Again the pause and then, like a flicker of light, a hot, glad little response.



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Doris moaned, almost a whisper. I shot a glance at her, then at Champlain.

"You want that stopped?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I promised her she could."

Doris's hand moved. I took it. It was wet. She squeezed mine, hard.

Something from Twink, unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Except the accident. Yes, it was like the accident — and *stop!* STOP!

"Stop!" I gasped. "Stop it!"

McCLINTOCK went right on working as if I hadn't made a sound. The other specialist, Zein, said to Champlain as if I couldn't hear, "Do we have to stand for this?"

"You're damn right you do," said Champlain.

Working, McClintock asked, "Stop? What do you mean, stop?"

Zein mumbled something to him. McClintock nodded and a nurse came flying across the room with a tray of hypodermics. McClintock used a number of them.

Twink went quiet. For a moment, I thought I would faint from relief.

All right, honey? All right? I made them stop. Twinkie. Is it all right?

Twink!

*Twink!*

I made some sort of noise, I don't know what. Champlain's hands were on my shoulders, grinding down like two oversized C-clamps. I shrugged off one, knocked off the other with my wrist. "Twink!" I shouted. Then Doris screamed shrilly and Twink vibrated like a gong.

"That won't do," I snapped, gesturing with my head.

"Want her out?"

"Don't you dare," said Doris.

"Yes. Now."

McClintock began, "Who's—" but Champlain said, "Shut up. Take her out."

After that, it went very quickly.

Just a little more, Twink, and it'll be all over and you'll be warm and comfy and you can sleep. And I'll be near while you sleep and with you when you wake up.

I tried to stop McClintock once more, when he took the little arm that had been immobilized across Twink's chest for so long and twisted it brutally up and back. But this time Champlain was on McClintock's side and he was right; the pain stopped almost instantly.

And then—was it weeks later, hours? The biggest part was over and they did things to her eyes, her mouth, while I found ways and yet new ways to thrust aside fury, ignore fatigue, negate fear,



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and press on and on and around and inside with I love you, Twink; I'm here; it's all right. Just a little more, a little—there, it's stopped. Are you all right, Twink?

She was all right. She was wonderful. When they were through with her, she was weak and she looked like hell, but she was all right. I stared at her and stared at her and I couldn't believe it; I couldn't contain it, either. I didn't know what to do. So I began to laugh.

"Okay, let's get out of here." Champlain loomed over me like a grounded parachute.

"Yeah, wait." I sidled around him and went to McClintock. "Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he said tonelessly.

Zein just turned his back.

I SAT by the bed where they had put Doris, tired, and I waited.

This was a lot different from that other hospital, that other time. Then I'd committed something and I was full of fear. Now I'd accomplished something and I was full of hope—and liquor, but they tasted much the same. Twink was asleep, breathing beautiful even breaths, far too weary to be afraid.

I was glad about so many things and I mentally thumbed through them all, one by one, with a huge and quiet delight. And I think that the one I was happiest about was my saying to Champlain afterward, "She'd have been perfectly all right even if I hadn't been there."

What I was so pleased about was that I said it, I didn't ask it. And he had laughed and filled my cup again.

"You're a mind-reader," he said, and it was the first time I had ever heard that and thought it was funny.

"You wanted a case history of a human being born with little or no birth trauma, you son."

"Well, nobody ever had one before," he admitted. "I'd have had a lot less trouble in my young life if my dad had been able to paddle me down that particular canal in a canoe."

"You're a louse and it was worth it," I'd told him.

Doris turned her head impatiently.

"I'm here," I whispered.

She looked at me out of the same composed, porcelain face. "Hi. How's your girl friend?"

"My *other* girl friend. Doris, she's beautiful! All pink. She has two eyes. Ten toes. Eight fingers."

"What?"

"And two thumbs. She's all right, darling, really all right. A perfectly normal newborn girl-baby."

"Oh, I'm . . . so glad. Does



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she . . . can you still—even after the Caesarean?"

I nodded and in that split second, I wished my fool head had rolled right off. Because as I did it, I realized that I could have lied; she *wanted* me to.

She began to cry. She said, "You made them knock me out and you did it all yourself. You've had her to talk to all this time and you always will, as long as you both live. I'll never ever cry about this again, I promise, because it's not your fault and I love you, anyway. But I'm going to cry about it now."

I crouched with my head on her pillow for a long, long time. Then I went away, because she was nowhere near finished.

She's never cried about that since, though.

Never once.

I guess there's some way a man can make up a thing like that to a woman.

If he keeps looking.

I guess.

—THEODORE STURGEON

## FORECAST

Next month, the Galaxy-Simon & Schuster $6,500 prize-winning novel, PREFERRED RISK by Edson McCann, comes to a literally sizzling conclusion. The will of the entire human race is probated all in one day . . . and yet there are heirs to inherit the whole planetary estate! Who are they? What trick did they have up their sleeves? If you miss the last installment, you'll never find out, so make sure you don't miss it!

There will be at least one novelet . . . LITTLE ORPHAN ANDROID by James E. Gunn, which turns up a question that has never been explored: Anybody can get a divorce, win a pardon from prison, go into bankruptcy or find a way out of trouble. But those are cinches compared with the problem of coping with this lab-made bundle of exasperating confusions and paradoxes!

And, of course, short stories; Willy Ley's FOR YOUR INFORMATION, in which he strips some veils from the mystery planet; and FIVE STAR SHELF returns . . . just in case you were wondering what became of it.

Perhaps, like us, you've been curious about the reaction to PREFERRED RISK. Just on the basis of the first two installments, there seems little doubt that this serial will join the exalted company of THE PUPPET MASTERS, GRAVY PLANET, THE DEMOLISHED MAN and other trail-blazing novels you've read in these pages, for it has been received with great enthusiasm. Let's hear what you think, eh?



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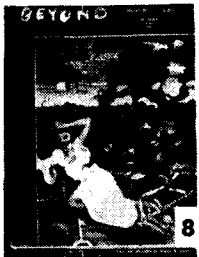

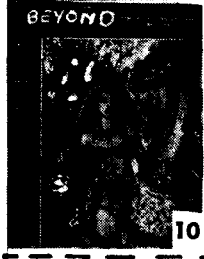

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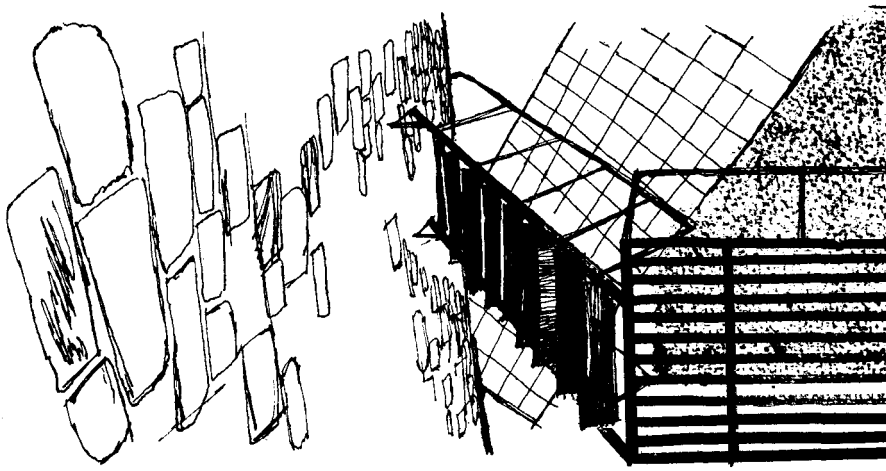

# PREFERRED RISK

PART 3 OF A 4-PART SERIAL

By EDSON McCANN

***If a planet is insured from pre-cradle to post-grave, somebody must be the beneficiary — and Wills had to find out who it was!***

Illustrated by KOSSIN

**SYNOPSIS**

*I AM* THOMAS WILLS, *trying to build a new life out of the wreckage my wife's death made of the old one. Everything is new, everything is different — my dull, comfortable world died with her and I find myself in romantic, war-ravaged Naples, on an errand of high adventure in the service of —*

THE COMPANY, *the giant combine of insurance corporations which protects the world by insuring every one of its activities. It is the finest work of mankind; the Company has once and for all called a halt to war, poverty, disease and danger, by the most modern application of actuarial methods. Everyone knows this to*



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*be true; they read it in their daily newspapers (Company owned), they learn it in their schools and colleges (Company financed). But in Naples I find a shock: There are subversives who doubt it. Among them is a beautiful girl named —*

RENA DELL'ANGELA, *who reminds me that Naples has just fought a war, who tells me that she and her father are in want because they oppose the Company, who points out that my wife, Marianna, died of a preventable disease. I am confused by her subversive arguments, but even more confused by the girl herself — because I begin to suspect that I am in love with her. Her father —*

BENEDETTO DELL'ANGELA, *is a "ward" of the Company — actually, says Rena, a prisoner. He is in suspended animation in the enormous, refrigerated Company vaults called —*

THE CLINICS. *In these places, persons suffering from incurable diseases are kept until such time as medical scientists can devise a cure. But Rena says they are prisons; and the fact that her father, a perfectly healthy individual, is there seems to be proof. Another involuntary "ward" is a strange man named —*

LUIGI ZORCHI, *who makes his career of collecting on accident claims. There is no fraud involved; when he collects damages for a lost limb, the limb is actually lost — but Zorchi, mysteriously, can regrow a severed member like a starfish! All this is unbearably confusing; but when things look their worst, I have good news. Straight from the Home Office comes —*

UNDERWRITER DEFOE, *a high executive of the Company and my deceased wife's distant relative, who got me the coveted Naples assignment in the first place. I look to him not only to straighten out my confusion, but to end the dry rot that has infected The Company's entire operation in Naples, from the lowest clerks to the Regional Director —*

GOGARTY, *a slothful lard tub of a man, given more to fast living than to carrying out the Company's urgent business. But Defoe in Naples is a different man than the Defoe I used to know in the Home Office.*

*I begin to suspect that perhaps the contentions of the dell'Angelas are true, and the Company is indeed a corrupt and cynical power combine! In any case, it is clear that Zorchi and Benedetto dell'Angela are wrongfully imprisoned. I help Rena free them and we flee to Rome — fugitives from everything I have been taught to love and respect and live for!*



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## IX

RENA craned her neck around the door and peered into the nave of the church. "He's kissing the Book," she reported. "It will be perhaps twenty minutes yet."

Her father said mildly, "I am in no hurry. It is good to rest here. Though truthfully, Mr. Wills, I thought I had been rested sufficiently by your Company."

I think we were all grateful for the rest. It had been a hectic drive up from Anzio. Even though Rena's "friends" were thoughtful people, they had not anticipated that we would have a legless man with us.

They had passports for Rena and myself and Benedetto; for Zorchi they had none. It had been necessary for him to hide under a dirty tarpaulin in the trunk of the ancient charcoal-burning car, while Rena charmed the Swiss Guards at the border. And it was risky. But the Guards charmed easily, and we got through.

Zorchi did not much appreciate it. He swore a ragged blue streak when we stopped in the shade of an olive grove and lugged him to the front seat again, and he didn't stop swearing until we hit the Appian Way. When the old gas-generator limped up a hill, he swore at its slowness; when it whizzed along the downgrades and level stretches, he swore at the way he was being bounced around.

I didn't regret rescuing Zorchi from the clinic — it was a matter of simple justice since I had helped trick him into it. But I did wish that it had been some more companionable personality that I had been obligated to.

Benedetto, on the other hand, shook my hand and said: "For God, I thank you," and I felt well repaid. But he was in the back seat being brought up to date by his daughter; I had the honor of Zorchi's company next to me. . .

There was a long Latin period from the church, a response from the altar boy, and then the final *Ite, missa est.* We heard the worshipers moving out of the church.

The priest came through the room we were waiting in, his robes swirling. He didn't look around, or give any sign that he knew we were there, though he almost stepped on Zorchi, sitting propped against a wall.

A moment later, another man in vaguely clerical robes entered and nodded to us. "Now we go below," he ordered.

Benedetto and I flanked Zorchi and carried him, an arm around each of our necks. We followed the sexton, or whatever he was, back into the church, before the altar — Benedetto automatically genuflected with the others, near-



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ly making me spill Zorchi onto the floor — to a tapestry-hung door. He pushed aside the tapestry, and a cool, musty draft came up from darkness.

The sexton lit a taper with a pocket cigarette lighter and led us down winding, rickety steps. There was no one left in the church to notice us; if anyone had walked in, we were tourists, doing as countless millions of tourists had done before us over the centuries.



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We were visiting the Catacombs.

AROUND us were the bones of the Christians of a very different Rome. Rena had told me about them: How they rambled under the modern city, the only entrances where churches had been built over them. How they had been nearly untouched for two thousand years. I even felt a little as though I really were a tourist as we descended, she had made me that curious to see them.

But I was disappointed. We lugged the muttering Zorchi through the narrow, musty corridors, with the bones of martyrs at our elbows, in the flickering light of the taper, and I had the curious feeling that I had been there before.

As, in a way, I had: I had been in the vaults of the Company's clinic at Anzio, in some ways very closely resembling these Catacombs —

Even to the bones of the martyrs.

I was almost expecting to see plastic sacks.

We picked our way through the warrens for several minutes, turning this way and that. I was lost in the first minute. Then the sexton stopped before a flat stone that had a crude, faded sketch of a fish on it; he leaned on it, and the stone discovered itself to be a door. We followed him through it into a metal-walled, high-ceilinged tunnel, utterly unlike the meandering Catacombs. I began to hear sounds; we went through another door, and light struck at our eyes.

I blinked and focused on a long room, half a dozen yards wide, almost as tall, at least fifty yards long. It appeared to be a section of an enormous tunnel; it appeared to be, and it was. Benedetto and I set Zorchi — still cursing — down on the floor and stared around.

There were people in the tunnel, dozens of them. There were desks and tables and file cabinets; it looked almost like any branch of the Company, with whirring mimeographs and clattering typewriters.

The sexton pinched out the taper and dropped it on the floor, as people came toward us.

"So now you are in our headquarters in Rome," said the man dressed as a sexton. "It is good to see you again, Benedetto."

"And it is much better to see you, Slovetski," the old man answered warmly.

THIS man Slovetski — I do not think I can say what he looked like.

He was, I found, the very leader of the "friends," the monarch



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of this underground headquarters. But he was a far cry from the image I had formed of a bearded agitator. There was a hint of something bright and fearful in his eyes, but his voice was warm and deep, his manner was reassuring, his face was friendly. Still — there was that cat-spark in his eyes.

Slovetski, that first day, gave me an hour of his time. He answered some of my questions — not all. The ones he smiled at, and shook his head, were about numbers and people. The ones he answered were about principles and things.

He would tell me, for instance, what he thought of the Company — endlessly. But he wouldn't say how many persons in the world were his followers. He wouldn't name any of the persons who were all around us. But he gladly told me about the place itself.

"History, Mr. Wills," he said politely. "History tells a man everything he needs to know. You look in the books, and you will learn of Mussolini, when this peninsula was all one state; he lived in Rome, and he started a subway. The archives even have maps. It is almost all abandoned now. Most of it was never finished. But the shafts are here, and the wiring that lights us still comes from the electric mains."

"And the only entrance is through the Catacombs?"

The spark gleamed bright in his eye for a second. Then he shrugged. "Why shouldn't I tell you? No. There are several others, but they are not all convenient." He chuckled. "For instance, one goes through a station on the part of the subway that is still in operation. But it would not have done for you, you see; Rena could not have used it. It goes through the gentlemen's washroom."

We chuckled, Slovetski and I. I liked him. He looked like what he once had been: a history teacher in a Company school, somewhere in Europe. We talked about History, and Civilization, and Mankind, and all the other capitalized subjects. He was very didactic and positive in what he said, just like a history teacher. But he was understanding. He made allowances for my background; he did not call me a fool. He was a patient monk instructing a novice in the mysteries of the order, and I was at ease with him.

But there was still that spark in his eye.

Rena disappeared almost as soon as we were safely in the tunnels. Benedetto was around, but he was as busy as Slovetski, and just as mysterious about what occupied him. So I had for company Zorchi.



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We had lunch. "Food!" he said, and the word was an epithet. "They offer this to me for food! For pigs, Weels. Not for Zorchi!" He pushed the plate away from him and stared morosely at the table.

We were given a room to share, and one of Slovetski's men fixed up a rope-and-pulley affair so Zorchi could climb into his bed unaided. He was used to the help of a valet; the first time he tried it, he slipped and fell on the stumps of his legs. It must have hurt.

He shrieked, "Assassins! All of them! They put me in a kennel with the apprentice assassin, and the other assassins make a guillotine for me to kill myself on!"

We had a long talk with Slovetski, on the ideals and principles of his movement. Zorchi stared mutinously at the wall. I found the whole thing very interesting — shocking, but interesting. But Zorchi was immune to shock — "Perhaps it is news to you, Weels, that the Company is a big beast?" — and he was interested in nothing in all the world but Zorchi.

By the end of the second day I stopped talking to him entirely. It wasn't kind. He disliked me, but he hated everyone else in the tunnel, so he had no one to talk to. But it was either that or hit him in the face, and — although many of my mores had changed overnight — I still did not think I could strike a man without legs.

And besides, the less I saw of Zorchi, the more time I had to think about Rena.

SHE returned on the third day, without a word of explanation to me of where she had been or what she had done. She greeted me and disappeared again, this time only for hours. Then she came back and said, "Now I am through, for a time. How have you liked our little hideaway?"

I said, "It gets lonesome."

"Lonesome?" Her brown eyes were wide and perfectly serious. "I had thought it would be otherwise, Tom. So many of us in this little space, how could you be lonesome?"

I took her hand. "I'm not lonesome now," I told her. We found a place to sit in a corner of the communal dining hall. Around us the life of the underground movement buzzed and swirled. It was much like a branch of the Company, as I have said; the work of this secret section seemed to be mostly a record-keeping depot for the activities that took place on the surface. But no one paid much attention to Rena and me.

What did we talk about? What couples have always talked about: Each other, and every-



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thing, and nothing. The only thing we did *not* talk about was my basic beliefs in regard to the Company. For I was too troubled in my mind to talk about them, and Rena sensitive enough not to bring them up.

For I had, with all honor, sworn an oath of allegiance to the Company; and I had not kept it.

I could not, even then, see any possibility of a world where the Company did not exist. For what the Company said of itself was true: Before the Company existed, men lived like beasts. There was always the instant danger of war and disease. No plan could be made, no hope could be held, that could not be wiped out by blind accident.

And yet, were men better off today? I could not doubt the truths I had been told. The Company permitted wars — I had seen it. The Company permitted disease — my own wife had died.

Somewhere there was an answer, but I couldn't find it. It was not, I was sure, in Slovetski's burning hatred of everything the Company stood for. But it could not be, either, in the unquestioning belief that I had once given.

But my views, it turned out, hardly mattered any more; the die was cast. Benedetto appeared in the entrance to the dining hall, peering about. He saw us and came over, his face grave.

"I am sorry, Mr. Wills," he said. "I have been listening to Radio Napoli. It has just come over the air: A description of you, and an order for your arrest. The charge is — murder!"

I GAPED at him, hardly believing. "Murder! But that's not true; I certainly never —"

Benedetto laid a hand on my shoulder. "Of course not, Mr. Wills. It is a fiction of the Company's, beyond doubt. But it is a fiction that may cause your death if you are discovered, do not doubt that."

I swallowed. "Who — whom did I murder?"

Benedetto shrugged. "I do not know who he is. The name they gave was Elio Barletteria."

That was the suspendee whose place Zorchi had usurped. I sat back, bewildered. It was true, at least, that I had had some connection with the man. But — kill him? Was it possible, I asked myself, that the mere act of taking him out of his plastic sack endangered his life? I doubted it, but still —

I asked Benedetto. He frowned. "It is — possible," he admitted at last. "We do not know much about the suspendees, Mr. Wills. The Company has seen to that. It is my opinion — only an opinion, I am afraid — that if this man



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Barletteria is dead, it had nothing to do with anything you did. Still —" he shrugged — "what difference does it make? If the Company calls you a murderer, you must be one, for the Company is always right. Is that not so?"

We left it at that, but I was far from easy in my mind. The dining hall filled, and we ate our evening meal, but I hardly noticed what I ate and I took no part in the conversation. Rena and her father considerately left me alone; Zorchi was, it seemed, sulking in our room, for he did not appear. But I was not concerned with him, for I had troubles of my own. I should have been. . .

After dinner was over, I excused myself and went to the tiny cubicle that had been assigned to Zorchi and myself. He wasn't there. Then I began to think: Would Zorchi miss a meal?

The answer was unquestionably no. With his metabolism, he needed many times the food of an ordinary person; his performance at table, in fact, was spectacular.

Something was wrong. I was shaken out of my self-absorption; I hurried to find Benedetto dell'-Angela, and told him that Zorchi was gone.

It didn't take long for us to find the answer. The underground hideout was not large; it had only so many exits. It was only a matter of moments before one of the men Benedetto had ordered to search returned with an alarmed expression.

The exit that led through the subway station was ajar. Somehow Zorchi had hitched himself, on his stumps, down the long corridor and out the exit. It had to be while we were eating; he could never have made it except when everyone was in one room.

How he had done it did not matter. The fact remained that Zorchi was gone and, with him, the secrecy of our hiding place.

## X

WE HAD to move. There was no way out of it.

"Zorchi hates the Company," I protested. "I don't think he'll go to them and —"

"No, Wills." Slovetski patiently shook his head. "We can't take a chance. If we had been able to recapture him, then we could stay here. But he got clean away." There was admiration in his eyes. "What a conspirator he would have made! Such strength and determination! Think of it, Wills, a legless man in the city of Rome. He cannot avoid attracting attention. He can barely move by himself. And yet, our men track him into the subway station, to



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a telephone . . . and that is all. Someone picks him up. Who? A friend, one supposes — certainly not the Company, or they would have been here before this. But to act so quickly, Wills!"

Benedetto dell'Angela coughed. "Perhaps more to the point, Slovetski, is how quickly we ourselves shall now act."

Slovetski grinned. "All is ready," he promised. "See, evacuation already has begun!"

Groups of men were quickly placing file folders into cartons and carrying them off. They were not going far, I found later, only to a deserted section of the ancient Roman Catacombs, from which they could be retrieved and transported, little by little, at a later date.

By sundown, Rena and I were standing outside the little church which contained the entrance to the Catacombs. The two of us went together; only two. It would look quite normal, it was agreed, for a young man and a girl to travel together, particularly after my complexion had been suitably stained and my Company clothes discarded and replaced with a set of Rome's best ready-to-wears.

It did not occur to me at the time, but Rena must have known that her own safety was made precarious by being with me. Rena alone had nothing to fear, even if she had been caught and questioned by an agent of the Company. They would suspect her, because of her father, but suspicion would do her no harm. But Rena in the company of a wanted "murderer" — and one traveling in disguise — was far less safe. . .

We found an ancient piston-driven cab and threaded through almost all of Rome. We spun around the ancient stone hulk of

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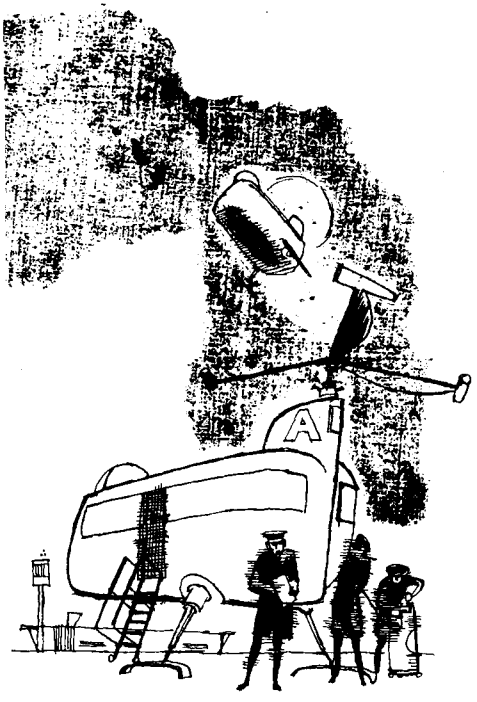
the Colosseum, passed the balcony where a sign stated the dictator, Mussolini, used to harangue the crowds, and climbed a winding, expensive-looking street to the Borghese Gardens.

Rena consulted her watch. "We're early," she said. We had *gelati* in an open-air pavilion, listening to the wheezing of a sweating band; then, in the twilight, we wandered hand in hand under trees for half an hour.



Then Rena said, "Now it is time." We walked to the far end of the Gardens where a small copter-field served the Class-A residential area of Rome. A dozen copters were lined up at the end of the take-off hardstand. Rena led me to the nearest of them.

I looked at it casually, and stopped dead.

"Rena!" I whispered violently. "Watch out!" The copter was black and purple; it bore on its flank the marking of the Swiss Guard, the Roman police force.

SHE pressed my hand. "Poor Tom," she said. She walked boldly up to one of the officers lounging beside the copter and spoke briefly to him, too low for me to hear.

It was only when the big vanes overhead had sucked us a hundred yards into the air, and we were leveling off and heading south, that she said: "These are friends too, you see. Does it surprise you?"

I swallowed, staring at the hissing jets at the ends of the swirling vanes. "Well," I said, "I'm not exactly *surprised,* but I thought that your friends were, well, more likely to be —"

"To be rabble?" I started to protest, but she was not angry. She was looking at me with gentle amusement. "Still you believe, Tom. Deep inside you: An enemy



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of the Company must be, at the best, a silly zealot like my father and me — and at the worst, rabble." She laughed as I started to answer her. "No, Tom, if you are right, you should not deny it; and if you are wrong — you will see."

I sat back and stared, disgruntled, at the purple sunset over the Mediterranean. I never saw such a girl for taking the wind out of your sails.

ONCE across the border, the Guards had no status, and it was necessary for them to swing inland, threading through mountains and passes, remaining as inconspicuous as possible.

It was little more than an hour's flight until I found landmarks I could recognize. To our right was the bright bowl of Naples; far to our left, the eerie glow that marked bombed-out New Caserta. And ahead, barely visible, the faint glowing plume that hung over Mount Vesuvius.

Neither Rena nor the Guards spoke, but I could feel in their tense attitudes that this was the danger-point. We were in the lair of the enemy. Undoubtedly we were being followed in a hundred radars, and the frequency-pattern would reveal our copter for what it was — a Roman police plane that had no business in that area. Even if the Company let us pass, there was always the chance that some Neapolitan radarman, more efficient, or more anxious for a promotion, than his peers would alert an interceptor and order us down. Certainly, in the old days, interception would have been inevitable; for Naples had just completed a war, and only short weeks back an unidentified aircraft would have been blasted out of the sky.

But we were ignored.

And that, I thought to myself, was another facet to the paradox. For when, in all the world's years before these days of the Company, was there such complacency, such deep-rooted security, that a nation just out of a war should have soothed its combat-jangled nerves overnight? Perhaps the Company had not ended wars. But the *fear* of wars was utterly gone.

We fluttered once around the volcano, and dipped in to a landing on a gentle hump of earth halfway up its slope, facing Naples and the Bay. We were a few hundred yards from a cluster of buildings — perhaps a dozen, in all.

I jumped out, stumbling and recovering myself. Rena stepped lightly into my arms. And without a word, the Guards fed fuel to the jets, the rotor whirled, and the copter lifted away from us and was gone.



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Rena peered about us, getting her bearings. There was a sliver of a moon in the eastern sky, enough light to make it possible to get about. She pointed to a dark hulk of a building far up the slope. "The Observatory. Come, Tom."

THE volcanic soil was rich, but not very useful to farmers. It was not only the question of an eruption of the cone, for that sort of hazard was no different in kind than the risk of hailstorm or drought. But the mountain sides did not till easily, its volcanic slopes being perhaps steeper than those of most mountains.

The ground under our feet had never been in cultivation. It was pitted and rough, and grown up in a tangle of unfamiliar weeds. And it was also, I discovered with considerable shock, warm to the touch.

I saw a plume of vapor, faintly silver in the weak light, hovering over a hummock. Mist, I thought. Then it occurred to me that there was too much wind for mist. It was steam! I touched the soil. Blood heat, at least.

I said, with some difficulty, "Rena, look!"

She laughed. "Oh, it is an eruption, Tom. Of course it is. But not a new one. It is lava, you see, from the little blast the Sicilians touched off. Do not worry about it. . ."

We clambered over the slippery cogs of a funicular railway and circled the ancient stone base of the building she had pointed to. There was no light visible; but Rena found a small door, rapped on it and presently it opened.

Out of the darkness came Slovetski's voice: "Welcome."

Once this building had been the Royal Vulcanological Observatory of the Kingdom of Italy. Now it was a museum on the surface, and underneath another of the hideouts of Rena's "friends."

But this was a hideout somewhat more important than the one in the Roman Catacombs, I found. Slovetski made no bones about it.

He said, "Wills, you shouldn't be here. We don't know you. We can't trust you." He held up a hand. "I know that you rescued dell'Angela. But that could all be an involved scheme of the Company. You could be a Company spy. You wouldn't be the first, Wills. And this particular installation is, shall I say, important. You may even find why, though I hope not. If we hadn't had to move so rapidly, you would never have been brought here. Now you're here, though, and we'll make the best of it." He



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looked at me carefully, then, and the glinting spark in the back of his eyes flared wickedly for a moment. "Don't try to leave. And don't go anywhere in this building where Rena or dell'Angela or I don't take you."

And that was that. I found myself assigned to the usual sort of sleeping accommodations I had come to expect in this group. Underground — cramped — and a bed harder than the Class-C Blue Heaven minimum.

THE next morning, Rena breakfasted with me, just the two of us in a tower room looking down over the round slope of Vesuvius and the Bay beneath. She said: "The museum has been closed since the bomb landed near, so you can roam around the exhibits if you wish. There are a couple of caretakers, but they're with us. The rest of us will be in conference. I'll try to see you for lunch."

And she conducted me to an upper level of the Observatory and left me by myself. I had my orders — stay in the public area of the museum. I didn't like them. I wasn't used to being treated like a small boy, left by his mother in a Company day nursery while she busied herself with the important and incomprehensible affairs of adults.

Still, the museum was interesting enough, in a way. It had been taken over by the Company, it appeared, and although the legend frescoed around the main gallery indicated that it was supposed to be a historical museum of the Principality of Naples, it appeared by examination of the exhibits that the "history" involved was that of Naples vis-a-vis the Company.

Not, of course, that such an approach was entirely unfair. If it had not been for the intervention of the Company, after the Short War, it is more than possible that Naples as an independent state would never have existed.

It was the Company's insistence on the dismantling of power centers (as Millen Carmody himself had described it) that had created Naples and Sicily and Prague and Quebec and Baja California and all the others.

Only the United States had been left alone — and that, I think, only because nobody dared to operate on a wounded tiger. In the temper of the nation after the Short War, the Company would have survived less than a minute if it had proposed severing any of the fifty-one states. . .

The museum was interesting enough, for anyone with a taste for horrors. It showed the changes in Neapolitan life over the past century or so. There was a re-



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construction of a typical Neapolitan home of the early Nineteen-forties: a squalid hovel, packed ten persons to the room, with an American G.I., precursor of the Company expediters, spraying DDT into the bedding. There was, by comparison, a typical Class-B Blue Heaven modern allotment — with a certain amount of poetic license; few Class-B homes really had polyscent showers and autocooks.

IT WAS the section on warfare, however, that was most impressive. It was in the far back of the building, in a large chamber anchored to bedrock. It held a frightening display of weapons, from a Tiger Tank to a gas-gun. Bulking over everything else in the room, even the tank, was the thirty-foot height of a Hell-bomb in a four-story display. I looked at it a second time, vaguely disturbed by something I hadn't quite placed — an indigo gleam to the metal of the warhead, with a hint of evil under its lacquered sheen. . .

It was cobalt. I bent to read the legend: *This is the casing of the actual cobalt bomb that would have been used on Washington if the Short War had lasted one more day. It is calculated that, loaded with a Mark XII hydrogen-lithium bomb, sufficient radioactive Cobalt-60 would have been transmuted to end all life on Earth within thirty days.*

I looked at it again, shuddering.

Oh, it was safe enough now. Until the hydrogen reaction could turn the ordinary cobalt sheathing into the deadly isotope-60, it was just such stuff as was used to alloy magnets and make cobalt glass. It was even more valuable as a museum piece than as the highly purified metal.

Score one for the Company. They'd put a stop to that danger. Nobody would have a chance to arm it and send it off now. No small war would find it more useful than the bomb it would need — and no principality would risk the Company's wrath in using it. And while the conspiracy might have planes and helicopters, the fissionable material was too rigidly under Company control for them to have a chance. The Super Hell-bomb would never go off. And that was something that might mean more to the Company's credit than anything else.

Maybe it was possible that in this controversy *both* sides were right. And, of course, there was the obvious corollary.

I continued my wandering, looking at the exhibits, the rubble of the museum's previous his-



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tory. The cast of the Pompeiian gladiator, caught by the cinder-fall in full flight, his straining body reproduced to every contorted line by the incandescent ashes that had encased him. The carefully chipped and labeled samples from the lava flows of the past two centuries. The awe-inspiring photographs of Vesuvius in eruption.

But something about the bomb casing kept bothering me. I wandered around a bit longer and then turned back to the main exhibit. The big casing stretched upward and downward, with narrow stairs leading down to the lower level at its base. It was on the staircase I'd noticed something before. Now I hesitated, trying to spot whatever it was. There was a hint of something down there. Finally, I shrugged and went down to inspect it more closely.

LYING at the base was a heavy radiation glove. A used, workman's glove, dirty with grease. And as my eyes darted up, I could see that the bolts on the lower servicing hatches were half-unscrewed.

Radiation gloves and tampering with the casing!

There were two doors to the pit for the bomb casing, but either one was better than risking the stairs again where someone might see me. Or so I figured. If they found I'd learned anything. . .

I grabbed for the nearer door, threw it open. I knew it was a mistake when the voice reached my ears.

"— after hitting the Home office with a Thousand-kiloton bomb. It's going to take fast work. Now the schedule I've figured out so far — God's damnation! How did you get in here, Wills?"

It was Slovetski, leaning across a table, staring at me. Around the table were Benedetto and four or five others I did not recognize. All of them looked at me as though I were the Antichrist, popped out of the marble at St. Peter's Basilica on Easter Sunday.

The spark was a raging flame in Slovetski's eyes. Benedetto dell'Angela said sharply, "Wait!" He strode over to me, half shielding me from Slovetski. "Explain this, Thomas," he demanded.

"I thought this was the hall door," I stammered, spilling the first words I could while I tried to find any excuse. . .

"Wills! I tell you, answer me!"

I said, "Look, did you expect me to carry a bell and cry unclean? I didn't mean to break in. I'll go at once. . ."

In a voice that shook, Slovetski said: "Wait one moment." He pressed a bell-button on the wall;



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we all stood there silent, the five of them staring at me, me wishing I was dead.

There was a patter of feet outside, and Rena peered in. She saw me and her hand went to her heart.

"Tom! But —"

Slovetski said commandingly, "Why did you permit him his liberty?"

Rena looked at him wide-eyed. "But, please, I asked you. You suggested letting him study the exhibits."

Benedetto nodded. "True, Slovetski," he said gravely. "You ordered her to attend until our — conference was over."

The flame surged wildly in Slovetski's eyes — not at me. But he got it under control. He said, "Take him away." He did not do me the courtesy of looking my way again. Rena took me by the hand and led me off, closing the door behind us.

As soon as we were outside, I heard a sharp babble of argument, but I could make out no words through the door. I didn't need to; I knew exactly what they were saying.

This was the proposition: *Resolved, that the easiest thing to do is put Wills out of the way permanently.* And with Slovetski's fiery eyes urging the positive, what eager debater would say him nay?

RENA said: "I can't tell you, Tom. *Please* don't ask me!"

I said, "This is no kid's game, Rena! They're talking about bombing the Home Office!"

She shook her head. "Tom, Tom. You must have misunderstood."

"I heard them!"

"Tom, *please* don't ask me any more questions."

I slammed my hand down on the table and swore. It didn't do any good. She didn't even look up from the remains of her dinner.

It had been like that all afternoon. The Great Ones brooded in secret. Rena and I waited in her room, until the museum's public visiting hours were over and we could go up into the freer atmosphere of the reception lounge. And then we waited there.

I said mulishly: "Ever since I met you, Rena, I've been doing nothing but wait. I'm not built that way!"

No answer.

I said, with all of my patience: "Rena, I heard them talking about bombing the Home Office. Do you think I am going to forget that?"

Leadenly: "No, Tom."

"So what does it matter if you tell me more? If I cannot be trusted, I already know too much. If I can be trusted, what does it



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matter if I know the rest?"

Again tears. "*Please* don't ask me!"

I yelled: "At least you can tell me what we're waiting for!"

She dabbed at her eyes. "Please, Tom, I don't know much more than you do. Slovetski, he is like this sometimes. He gets, I suppose you would say, thoughtful. He concentrates so very much on one thing, you see, that he forgets everything around him. It is possible that he has forgotten that we are waiting. I don't know."

I snarled, "I'm tired of this. Go in and remind him!"

"No, Tom!" There was fright in her voice; and I found that she had told me one of the things I wanted to know. If it was not wise to remind Slovetski that I was waiting his pleasure, the probability was that it would not be pleasant for me when he remembered.

I said, "But you must know something, Rena. Don't you see that it could do no harm to tell me?"

She said miserably, "Tom, I know very little. I did not — did not know as much as you found out." I stared at her. She nodded. "I had perhaps a suspicion, it is true. Yes, I suspected. But I did not *really* think, Tom, that there was a question of bombing. It is not how we were taught. It is not what Slovetski promised, when we began."

"You mean you didn't know Slovetski was planning violence?"

She shook her head. "And even now, I think, perhaps you heard wrong, perhaps there was a mistake."

I stood up and leaned over her. "Rena, listen to me. There was no mistake. They're working on that casing. Tell me what you know!"

She shook her head, weeping freely.

I raged: "This is asinine! What can there be that you will not tell? The Company supply base that Slovetski hopes to raid to get a bomb? The officers he plans to bribe, to divert some other nation's quota of plutonium?"

She took a deep breath. "Not that, Tom."

"Then what? You don't mean to say that he has a complete underground separator plant — that he is making his own plutonium!"

She was silent for a long time, looking at me. Then she sighed. "I will tell you, Tom. No, he does not have a plant. He doesn't need one, you see. He already has a bomb."

I STRAIGHTENED. "That's impossible."

She was shaking her head. I protested, "But the — the *quotas,*



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Rena. The Company tracks every milligram of fissionable material from the moment it leaves the reactor! The inspections! Expediters with Geiger counters cover every city in the world!"

"Not here, Tom. You remember that the Sicilians bombed Vesuvius? There is a high level of radioactivity all up and down the mountain. Not enough to be dangerous, but enough to mask a buried bomb." She closed her eyes. "And — well, you are right, Tom. I might as well tell you. In that same war, you see, there was a bomb that did not explode. You recall?"

"Yes, but —"

"But it couldn't explode, Tom. It was a dummy. Slovetski is a brilliant man. Before that bomb left the ground, he had diverted it. What went up was a hollow shell. What is left — the heart of the bomb — is buried forty feet beneath us."

I stared at her, the room reeling. I was clutching at straws. I whispered, "But that was only a fission bomb, Rena. Slovetski — I heard him — he said a Thousand-kiloton bomb. That means hydrogen, don't you see? Surely he hasn't tucked one of those away."

Rena's face was an agony of regret. "I do not understand all these things, so you must bear with me. I know this; there has been secret talk about the Milanese generators, and I know that the talk has to do with heavy water. And I am not stupid altogether, I know that from heavy water one can get what is used in a hydrogen bomb. And there is more, of course — lithium, perhaps? But he has that. You have seen it, I think. It is on a pedestal in this building."

I sat down hard. It was impossible. But it all fell into place. Given the fissionable core of the bomb — plus the deuterium, plus the lithium-bearing shell — it was no great feat to put the parts together and make a Hell-bomb.

The mind rejected it; it was too fantastic. It was frightful and terrifying, and worst of all was that something lurking at the threshold of memory, something about that bomb on display in the museum. . .

And, of course, I remembered.

"Rena!" I said, struggling for breath. I nearly could not go on, it was too dreadful to say. "Rena! Have you ever looked at that bomb? Have you read the placard on it? *That bomb is cobalt!*"

## XI

FROM the moment I had heard those piercing words from Slovetski's mouth, I had been obsessed with a vision. A Hell-bomb on the Home Office.



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America's eastern seaboard split open. New York a hole in the ocean, from Kingston to Sandy Hook; orange flames spreading across Connecticut and the Pennsylvania corner.

That was gone — and in its place was something worse.

Radiocobalt bombing wouldn't simply kill locally by a gout of flaring radiation. It would leave the atmosphere filled with colloidal particles of deadly, radioactive Cobalt-60. A little of that could be used to cure cancers and perform miracles. The amount released from the sheathing of cobalt — normal, "safe" cobalt — around a fissioning hydrogen bomb could kill a world. A single bomb of that kind could wipe out all life on Earth, as I remembered my schooling.

I'm no physicist; I didn't know what the quantities involved might mean, once the equations came off the drafting paper and settled like a ravening storm on the human race. But I had a glimpse of radioactive dust in every breeze, in every corner of every land. Perhaps a handful of persons in Cambodia or Vladivostok or Melbourne might live through it. But there was no question in my mind: If that bomb went off, it was the end of our civilization.

I saw it clearly.

And so, having betrayed the Company to Slovetski's gang, I came full circle.

Even Judas betrayed only One.

GETTING away from the Observatory was simple enough, with Rena shocked and confused enough to look the other way. Finding a telephone near Mount Vesuvius was much harder.

I was two miles from the mountain before I found what I was looking for — a Blue Wing fully-automatic filling station. The electronic scanners clucked worriedly, as they searched for the car I should have been driving, and the policy-punching slot glowed red and receptive, waiting for my order. I ignored them.

What I wanted was inside the little unlocked building — A hushaphone-booth with vision attachment. The important thing was to talk direct to Defoe and only to Defoe. In the vision screen, impedance mismatch would make the picture waver if there was anyone uninvited listening in.

But I left the screen off while I put through my call. The office servo-operator (it was well after business hours) answered blandly, and I said: "Connect me with Defoe, crash priority."

It was set to handle priority matters on a priority basis; there was neither fuss nor argument,



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though a persistent buzzing in the innards of the phone showed that, even while the robot was locating Defoe for me, it was double-checking the connection to find out why there was no vision on the screen.

It said briskly, "Stand by, sir," and I was connected with Defoe's line — on a remote hookup with the hotel where he was staying, I guessed. I flicked the screen open.

But it wasn't Defoe on the other end of the line. It was Susan Manchester, with that uncharacteristic, oddly efficient look she had shown at the vaults.

She said crisply, and not at all surprised: "Tom Wills."

"That's right," I said, thinking quickly. Well, it didn't much matter. I should have realized that Defoe's secretary, howsoever temporary, would be taking his calls. I said rapidly: "Susan, I can't talk to you. It has to be Defoe. Take my word for it, it's important. Please put him on."

She gave me no more of an argument than the robot had.

In a second, Defoe was on the screen, and I put Susan out of my mind. She must have said something to him, because the big, handsome face was unsurprised, though the eyes were contracted. "Wills!" he snapped. "You fool! Where are you?"

I said, "Mr. Defoe, I have to talk to you. It's a very urgent matter."

"Come in and do it, Wills! Not over the telephone."

I shook my head. "No, sir. I can't. It's too, well, risky."

"Risky for you, you mean!" The words were icily disgusted. "Wills, you have betrayed me. No man ever got away with that. You're imposing on me, playing on my family loyalty to your dead wife, and I want to tell you that you won't get away with it. There's a murder charge against you, Wills! Come in and talk to me — or else the police will pick you up before noon."

I SAID with an effort, "I don't mean to impose on any loyalty, but, in common decency, you ought to hear —"

"Decency!" His face was cold. "You talk about decency! You and that dell'Angela traitor you joined. Decency! Wills, you're a disgrace to the memory of a decent and honest woman like Marianna. I can only say that I am glad — glad, do you hear me? — that she's dead and rid of you."

I said, "Wait a minute, Defoe! Leave Marianna out of this. I only —"

"Don't interrupt me! God, to think a man I trusted should turn out to be Judas himself! You animal, the Company has protected you from the day you were born,



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and you try to destroy it. Why, you pitiful idiot, you aren't fit to associate with the dogs in the kennel of a decent human being!"

There was more. Much, much more. It was a flow of abuse that paralyzed me, less because of what he said than because of who was saying it. Suave, competent Defoe, ranting at me like a wounded Gogarty! I couldn't have been more astonished if the portrait of Millen Carmody had whispered a bawdy joke from the frontispiece of the Handbook.

I stood there, too amazed to be furious, listening to the tirade from the midget image in the viewplate. It must have lasted for three or four minutes; then, almost in mid-breath, Defoe glanced at something outside my range of vision, and stopped his stream of abuse. I started to cut in while I could, but he held up one hand quickly.

He smiled gently. Very calmly, as though he had not been damning me a moment before, he said: "I shall be very interested to hear what you have to say."

That floored me. It took me a second to shake the cobwebs out of my brain before I said waspishly, "If you hadn't gone through all that jabber, you would have heard it long ago."

The midget in the scanner shrugged urbanely. "True," he conceded. "But then, Thomas, I wouldn't have had you."

And he reached forward and clicked off the phone. Tricked! Tricked and trapped! I cursed myself for stupidity. While he kept me on the line, the call was being traced — there was no other explanation. And I had fallen for it!

I slapped the door of the booth open and leaped out.

I got perhaps ten feet from the booth.

Then a rope dropped over my shoulders. Its noose yanked tight around my arms, and I was being dragged up, kicking futilely. I caught a glimpse of the broad Latin faces gaping at me from below, then two men on a rope ladder had me.

I was dragged in through the bottom hatch of a big helicopter with no markings. The hatch closed. Facing me was a lieutenant of expediters.

The two men tumbled in after me and reeled in the rope ladder, as the copter dipped and swerved away. I let myself go limp as the rope was loosened around me; when my hands were free I made my bid.

I leaped for the lieutenant; my fist caught him glancingly on the throat, sending him reeling and choking backward. I grabbed for the hard-pellet gun at his hip — he was pawing at it — and we tumbled across the floor.



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It was, for one brief moment, a chance. I was no copter pilot, but the gun was all the pilot I'd need — if only I got it out.

But the expediters behind me were no amateurs. I ducked as the knotted end of the rope whipped savagely toward me. Then one of the other expediters was on my back; the gun came out, and flew free. And that was the end of that.

I had, I knew, been a fool to try it. But I wasn't sorry. They had too much rough-and-tumble training for me to handle. But that one blow had felt good.

It didn't seem as worth while a few moments later. I was fastened to a seat, while the wheezing lieutenant gave orders in a strangled voice. "Not too many marks on him," he was saying. "Try it over the kidneys again..."

I never even thought of maintaining a heroic silence. They had had plenty of experience with the padded club, too, and I started to black out twice before finally I went all the way down.

I CAME to with a light shining in my eyes.

There was a doctor putting his equipment away. "He'll be all right, Mr. Defoe," he said, and snapped his bag shut and left the circle of light.

I felt terrible, but my head was clearing.

I managed to focus my eyes. Defoe was there, and a couple of other men. I recognized Gogarty, looking sick and dejected, and another face I knew — it was out of my Home Office training — an officer whose name I didn't recall, wearing the uniform of a lieutenant-general of expediters. That meant at least an expediter corps in Naples!

I said weakly, "Hi."

Defoe stood over me. He said, "I'm very glad to see you, Thomas. Coffee?"

He steadied my hands as I gulped it. When I had managed a few swallows, he took the cup away.

"I did not think you would resist arrest, Thomas," he said in a parental tone.

I said, "Damn it, you didn't have to arrest me! I came down here of my own free will!"

"Down?" His eyebrows rose. "Down from where do you mean, Thomas?"

"Down from Mount —" I hesitated, then finished. "All right. Down from Mount Vesuvius. The museum, where I was hiding out with the ringleaders of the anti-Company movement. Is that what you want to know?"

Defoe crackled: "Manning!" The lieutenant-general saluted and left the room. Defoe said, "That was the first thing I wanted, yes. But now I want



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much more. Please begin talking, Thomas. I will listen."

I talked. There was nothing to stop me. Even with my body a mass of aches and pains from the tender care of the Company's expediters, I still had to side with the Company in this. For the Cobalt-bomb ended all loyalties.

I left nothing important out, not even Rena. I admitted that I had taken Benedetto from the clinic, how we had escaped to Rome, how we had fled to Vesuvius . . . and what I had learned. I made it short, skipping a few unimportant things like Zorchi.

And Defoe sat sipping his coffee, listening, his warm eyes twinkling.

I stopped. He pursed his lips, considering.

"Silly," he said at last.

"Silly? What's silly!"

He said, "Thomas, I don't care about your casual affairs. And I would have excused your — precipitousness — since you have brought back certain useful information. Quite useful. I don't deny it. But I don't like being lied to, Thomas."

"I haven't lied!"

He said sharply, "There is no way to get fissionable material except through the Company!"

"Oh, hell!" I shook my head. "How about a dud bomb, Defoe?"

For the first time he looked puzzled. "Dud bomb?"

Gogarty looked sick. "There's — there's a report on your desk, Mr. Defoe," he said worriedly. "We — well — figured the half-masses just got close enough to boil instead of to explode. We —"

"I see." Defoe looked at him for a long moment. Then, disregarding Gogarty, he turned back to me, shoved the coffee at me. "All right, Thomas. They've got the warhead. Hydrogen? Cobalt? What about fuel?"

I told him what I knew. Gogarty, listening, licked his lips. I didn't envy him. I could see the worry in him, the fear of Defoe's later wrath. For in Defoe, as in Slovetski, there was that deadly fire. It blazed only when it was allowed to; but what it touched withered and died. I had not seen Defoe as tightly concentrated, as drivingly intent, before. I was sorry for Gogarty when at last, having drained me dry, Defoe left. But I was glad for me.

HE WAS gone less than an hour — just time for me to eat a Class-C meal a silent expediter brought.

He thrust the door open and stared at me with whitely glaring eyes. "If I thought you were lying, Thomas . . ." His voice was cracking with suppressed emotion.

"What happened?" I demanded.



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"Don't you know?" He stood trembling, staring at me. "You told the truth — or part of the truth. There *was* a hideout on Vesuvius. But an hour ago they got away — while you were wasting time. Was it a stall, Thomas? Did you know they would run?"

I said, "Defoe, don't you see, that's all to the good? If they had to run, they couldn't possibly take the bomb with them. That means —"

He was shaking head. "Oh, but you're wrong, Thomas. According to the director of the albergo down the hill, three skyhook helicopters came over — big ones. They peeled the roof off, as easy as you please, and they lifted the bomb out and then flew away."

I SAID stupidly, "Where?"

He nodded. There was no emotion in his voice, only in his eyes. He might have been discussing the weather. "Where? That is a good question. I hope we will find it out, Thomas. We're checking the radar charts; they can't hide for long. But how did they get away at all? Why did you give them the time?"

He left me. Perversely, I was almost glad. It was part of the price of switching allegiance, I was learning, that shreds and tatters of loyalties cling to you and carry over. When I went against the Company to rescue Benedetto, I still carried with me my Adjusters' Handbook. And I confess that I never lost the habit of reading a page or two in it, even in the Catacombs, when things looked bad. And when I saw the murderous goal that Slovetski's men were marching toward, and I returned to Defoe, I still could feel glad that Benedetto, at least, had got away.

But not far.

It was only a few hours, but already broad daylight when Gogarty, looking shaken, came into the room. He said testily, "Damn it, Wills, I wish I'd never seen you! Come on! Defoe wants you with us."

"Come on where?" I got up as he gestured furiously for haste.

"Where do you think? Did you think your pals would be able to stay out of sight forever? We've got them pinpointed, bomb and all."

He was almost dragging me down the corridor, toward a courtyard. I limped out into the bright morning and blinked. The court was swarming with armed expediters, clambering into personnel-carrying copters marked with the vivid truce-team insignia of the Company. Gogarty hustled me into the nearest and the jets sizzled and we leaped into the air.

I shouted, over the screaming of the jets, "Where are we going?"

Gogarty spat and pointed down



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the long purple coastline. "To their hideout — Pompeii!"

## XII

NO ONE discussed tactics with me, but it was clear that this operation was carefully planned. Our copter was second in a long string of at least a dozen that whirled down the coastline, past the foothills of Vesuvius, over the clusters of fishing villages and vineyards.

I had never seen Pompeii, but I caught a glimpse of something glittering and needle-nosed, upthrust in the middle of a cluster of stone buildings that might have been the ruins.

Then the first ten of the copters spun down to a landing, while two or three more flew a covering mission overhead.

The expediters, hard-pellet guns at the ready, leaped out and formed in a skirmish line. Gogarty and a pair of expediters stayed close by me, behind the line of attack; we followed the troops as they dog-trotted through a field of some sort of grain, around fresh excavations, down a defile into the shallow pit that held the ruins of first-century Pompeii.

I had no time for archeology, but I remember tripping over wide, shallow gutters in the stone-paved streets, and cutting through a tiny villa of some sort whose plaster walls still were decorated with faded frescoes.

Then we heard the spatter of gunfire and Gogarty, clutching at me, skidded to a halt. "This is specialist work," he panted. "Best thing we can do is stay out of it."

I peered around a column and saw a wide open stretch. Beyond it was a Roman arch and the ruined marble front of what once had been a temple of some sort; in the open ground lay the three gigantic copters Defoe had mentioned.

The vanes of one of them were spinning slowly, and it lurched and quivered as someone tried to get it off the ground under fire. But the big thing was in the middle of the area: The bomb, enormous and terrifying as its venomous nose thrust up into the sky. By its side was a tank truck, the side of it painted with the undoubtedly untrue legend that it contained crude olive oil. Hydrazine, more likely!

Hoses connected it with the base of the guided-missile bomb; and a knot of men were feverishly in action around it, some clawing desperately at the fittings of the bomb, some returning the skirmish fire of the expediters.

We had the advantage of surprise, but not very much of that. From the top of the ancient temple a rapid-fire pellet gun sprayed



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into the flank of the skirmish line, which immediately broke up as the expediters leaped for cover.

One man fell screaming out of the big skyhook copter, but someone remained inside, for it lurched and dipped and roared crazily across the field in as ragged a takeoff as I ever saw, until its pilot got it under control. It bobbed over the skirmish line under fire, but returning the fire as whatever few persons were inside it leaned out and strafed the expediters. Then the skyhook itself came under attack as the patrol copters swooped in.

The big ship staggered toward the nearest of them. It must have been intentional: We could see the faint flare of muzzle-blast as the two copters fired on each other; they closed, and there was a brutal rending noise as they collided. They were barely a hundred feet in the air; they crashed in a breath, and flames spread out from the wreckage.

AND Slovetski's resources still had not run out. There was a roar and a screech of metal, and a one-man cobra tank slithered out of one of the buildings and came rapidly across the field toward the expediters.

Gogarty, beside me, was sobbing with fear; that little tank carried self-loading rockets. It blasted a tiny shrine into rubble, spun and came directly toward us.

We ran. I didn't even see the second expediter aircraft come whirling in and put the cobra tank out of action with its heavy weapons. I heard the firing, but it was swallowed up in a louder screaming roar.

Gogarty stared at me from the drainage trench we had flung ourselves into. We both leaped up and ran back toward the open field.

There was an explosion as we got there — the fake "olive-oil" truck, now twenty yards from the bomb, had gone up in a violent blast. But we hardly noticed. For at the base of the bomb itself red-purple fire was billowing out. It screamed and howled and changed color to a blinding blue as the ugly squat shape danced and jiggled. The roar screamed up from a bull-bass to a shrieking coloratura and beyond as the bomb lifted and gained speed and, in the blink of an eye, was gone.

I hardly noticed that the sound of gunfire died raggedly away. We were not the only ones staring unbelievingly at the sky where that deadly shape had disappeared. Of the scores of men on both sides in that area, not a single eye was anywhere else.

The bomb had been fueled; we were too late. Its servitors, per-



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haps at the cost of their own lives, had torched it off. It was on its way.

The cobalt bomb — the single weapon that could poison the world and wipe out the human race — was on its way.

## XIII

WHAT can you do after the end? What becomes of any plot or plan, when an indigo-gleaming missile sprays murder into the sky and puts a period to planning?

I do not think there ever was a battlefield as abruptly quiet as that square in old Pompeii. Once the bomb had gone, there was not a sound. The men who had been firing on each other were standing still, jaws hanging, eyes on the sky.

But it couldn't last. For one man was not surprised; one man knew what was happening and was ready for it.

A crouching figure at the top of the ruined temple gesticulated and shouted through a power-megaphone: "Give it up, Defoe! You've lost, you've lost!" It was Slovetski, and beside him a machine-gun crew sighted in on the nearest knot of expediters.

Pause, while the Universe waited. And then his answer came; it was a shot that screamed off a cracked capital, missing him by millimeters. He dropped from sight, and the battle was raging.

Human beings are odd. Now that the cause of the fight was meaningless, it doubled in violence. There were fewer than a hundred of Slovetski's men involved, and not much more than that many expediters. But for concentrated violence I think they must have overmatched anything in the Short War's ending.

I was a non-combatant; but the zinging of the hard-pellet fire swarmed all around me. Gogarty, in his storm sewer, was safe enough, but I was more exposed. While the rapid-fire weapons pattered all around me, I jumped up and zigzagged for the shelter of a low-roofed building.

The walls were little enough protection, but at least I had the illusion of safety. Most of all, I was out of sight.

I wormed my way through a gap in the wall to an inner chamber. It was as tiny a room as ever I have been in; less than six feet in its greatest dimension — length — and with most of its floor area taken up by what seemed to be a rude built-in bed. Claustrophobia hit me there; the wall on the other side was broken too, and I wriggled through.

The next room was larger; and it was occupied.

A man lay, panting heavily, in



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a corner. He pushed himself up on an elbow to look at me. In a ragged voice he said: "Thomas!" And he slumped back, exhausted by the effort, blood dripping from his shirt.

I leaped over to the side of Benedetto dell'Angela. The noise of the battle outside rose to a high pitch and dwindled raggedly away.

I SUPPOSE it was inertia that kept me going — certainly I could see with my mind's vision no reason to keep struggling. The world was at an end. There was no reason to try again to escape from the rubber hoses of the expediters — and, after I had seen the resistance end, and an expediter-officer appeared atop the temple where Slovetski had shouted his defiance, no possibility of rejoining the rebels.

Without Slovetski, they were lost.

But I kept on.

Benedetto helped. He knew every snake-hole entrance and exit of all the hideouts of Slovetski's group. They had not survived against the strength of the Company without acquiring skill in escape routes; and here, too, they had a way out. It required a risky dash across open ground but, even with Benedetto on my back, I made it.

And then we were in old Pompeii's drainage sewer, the arched stone tunnel that once had carried sewage from the Roman town to the sea. It was a hiding place, and then a tunnel to freedom, for the two of us.

We waited there all of that day, Benedetto mumbling almost inaudibly beside me. In lucid moments, he told me the name of the hotel where Rena had gone when the Observatory was abandoned, but there seemed few lucid moments. Toward evening, he began to recover.

We found our way to the seashore just as darkness fell. There was a lateen-rigged fishing vessel of some sort left untended. I do not suppose the owner was far

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away, but he did not return in time to stop us.

Benedetto was very weak. He was muttering to himself, words that I could hardly understand. "Wasted, wasted, wasted," was the burden of his complaint. I did not know what he thought was wasted — except, perhaps, the world.

We slipped in to one of the deserted wharves under cover of darkness, and I left Benedetto to find a phone. It was risky, but what risk mattered when the world was at an end?

Rena was waiting at the hotel. She answered at once. I did not think the call had been intercepted — or that it would mean anything to anyone if it had. I went back to the boat to wait with Benedetto for Rena to arrive, in a rented car. We didn't dare chance a cab.

Benedetto was sitting up, propped rigidly against the mast, staring off across the water. Perhaps I startled him as I came to the boat; he turned awkwardly and cried out weakly.

Then he saw that it was I. He said something I could not understand and pointed out toward the west, where the Sun had gone down long before.

But there was still light there — though certainly not sunset.

Far off over the horizon was a faint glow! I couldn't understand at first, since I was sure the bomb had been zeroed-in on the Home Offices in New York; but something must have happened. From that glow, still showing in the darkness so many hours after the explosion as the dust particles gleamed bluely, it must have gone off over the Atlantic.

There was no doubt in my mind any longer. The most deadly weapon the world had ever known had gone off!

—EDSON McCANN

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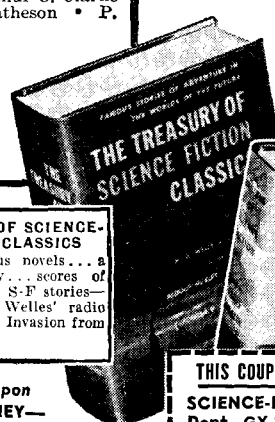


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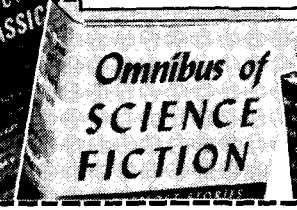

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